

COMMUNITY AND (DIS)ORDER IN ANTEBELLUM MISSISSIPPI: IDENTITY
AND VIOLENCE IN THE MAKING OF A SLAVE SOCIETY

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In the century following the Civil War, the state of Mississippi became infamous as a region defined by its open violence and continuous efforts to impose order and control. With the state's Constitution, passed in 1890, Mississippi took the lead in efforts to control the South's Black population politically, socially, and economically. The system of sharecropping tied generations to the land, and the deaths and destruction following Mississippi's Great Flood of 1927 demonstrated that the work produced held more value to Mississippi's economic and political elites than the workers' lives. Whether at the notorious Parchman State Penitentiary or in rural Sunflower County holding the final line of defense in the face of the nation's push to end Segregation and Jim Crow, Mississippi proudly announced its willingness to violently defend its "way of life."

The roots of such a "culture of violence" can be found in eras predating the Civil War and Reconstruction. This project examines the construction and evolution of Mississippi's society during the antebellum era

of slavery and demonstrates the ways in which ideas of “self” and “other” led to the formation of “communities” among both free and enslaved people in the state. These fluid definitions of identity served as justifications for actions taken by individuals and groups in defense of shared values and mores, as well as in efforts to disrupt various mechanisms of control. By focusing on separate incidents of extreme violence occurring during the summer of 1835 (one victimizing white “outsiders” and the other including both white and black targets), this project demonstrates the centrality of coercive force in efforts to establish and maintain order within the region as well as the ways in which violence and fear served to disrupt such efforts. While slavery rests at the center of this developing society, violence and fear flowed in both directions, to and from slavery, shaping both the institution and the broader society of Mississippi in which it developed. It is this mixture of identity and coercive violence that helps to explain what made Mississippi “Mississippi.”

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William James Harris, Sr. was born in 1971 in Bloomington, Indiana. As the child of parents who fought the battles of the Civil Rights Movement and whose father later became a distinguished historian of African American History, the path to an interest in academia truly began in the earliest stages of life.

Upon graduation from high school in Houston, Texas he began his undergraduate studies at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Ga., before ultimately graduating with a B.A. in history from Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama. The experience of attending these Historically Black institutions and their legacies in relationship to the Black experience in America helped foster a continued interest in African American history.

This interest led to a continuation of his education, first resulting in an M.A. in History at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio and subsequently a second M.A. in History from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Whereas his initial interests centered on student activism during the 20th Century Civil Rights Movement, the intellectual journey ultimately led to questions regarding the legacies of slavery and its impact on the making of the American Jim Crow South.

William currently teaches at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, focusing primarily on courses in American History and the place of race and violence in the American experience. He lives in

Ithaca, New York with his wife, Ginia, and children William Jr. (BJ) and Kennedy.

For Ginia, BJ, and Kennedy

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I offer the ultimate thanks to my beautiful wife, Ginia, who has meant more to my life and any successes that I may achieve than I could ever begin to deserve. You always saw inside me, recognizing the man that I had the potential to be. It is your love and support that constantly moves me forward in all things that I do.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MDAH: Mississippi Department of Archives and History

SHC: Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Newspapers, plantation journals, and diaries from Antebellum Mississippi are filled with accounts of extreme acts of violence and oppression. In examining these accounts, readers tend to focus solely on the levels of savagery and brutality found within these acts. However, what often proves to be more instructive in examining these events is the normalcy with which such acts came to be described by the perpetrators and other observers. Throughout the antebellum era, Mississippi slaveholders viewed violence and death among their enslaved people through the prism of productivity and control rather than in terms of its morality or humanity. The routine nature of slaveholders' descriptive comments regarding their slaves' suffering, and a focus on whether or not they would soon return to work, exposed the slaveholders' callous views of their "property." What emerged in antebellum Mississippi was a culture of violence; a culture in which excessive acts of brutality and constant fears of violent acts and retribution among blacks and whites came to be viewed as normative rather than exceptional. Everard Green Baker, a Mississippi slaveholder,

demonstrates such sentiments in the various entries found within his personal journal.

Baker viewed himself as a pious, religious man, going so far as to proclaim in the heading of his diary that this was, “A Journal -- Devoted to subjects, moral, speculative, and common places – in which will appear the conscientious workings of an impartial mind, as far as a man can divest his mental eye from that prejudice, which labors to defeat good & propagate evil.”¹ However, Baker’s “conscientious” mind becomes far less evident as he describes the daily activities on his plantation. After recounting the death of “a negro girl about 7 years of age,” Baker opts to focus his comments on the weather, with an eye on the ability of his slaves to continue to produce, rather than acknowledging any sense of loss among his slaves.² Even more shockingly, Baker most clearly demonstrates how unexceptional slaveholders viewed the most extreme acts of violence when he described a confrontation between an enslaved man and his overseer on a neighboring plantation. According to Baker,

“Day before yesterday, a boy belonging to Thad Sorsby stabbed Mr. Hugh Hardin twice in the side because he was agoing to whip him - - Hardin then shot at him but missed -- - then drew his knife & stabbed the boy 25 times, holding the boy in the meantime by the wrist of the hand in which he

¹ Everard Green Baker Diaries, February 8, 1847. SHC #41, Volumes 2-4 (Typescripts) Box 1. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

² Ibid, August 22, 1850.

held the knife. He stabbed him 4 times in the head breaking his skull in two places, the boy first drew a deadly weapon. They are both doing pretty well & may recover. There is strong reason to believe that 5 of the men on the place were engaged in plotting against the life of Mr. Hardin who was overseeing there. Several Gents assembled & *we* whipped one.”³

While clearly worthy of mention in Baker’s diary, the nonchalant manner in which he describes this brutal incident reveals the centrality and normalcy of violence in antebellum Mississippi’s culture. The violence described in this account, as exhibited by both the enslaved and the overseer, points to recurrent patterns of unrest and efforts for control that continued throughout the period. White Mississippians used violence as a tool to maintain order by punishing those enslaved men and women believed to be stepping out of line while simultaneously sending messages to others who might follow suit.

This culture of violence in Mississippi extended well beyond the end of slavery in the state. In the generation following the era of Reconstruction, Luther Holbert was accused of killing James Eastland (the uncle of Senator James Eastland of Mississippi) near Doddsville, Mississippi in 1904. Holbert, a black sharecropper, along with his wife, who remained unnamed in newspaper accounts describing the incident, immediately fled into the Mississippi swamps surrounding the Eastland plantation, which consisted of 2300 acres. Woods Eastland, the brother of the deceased, immediately

³ Ibid, June 26, 1854.

pulled together a posse consisting of fifty men to pursue the Holberts. Within two days of the killing, over 250 men across four counties were involved in the search.⁴ Once captured, the posse took the Holberts back to Doddsville, where Woods Eastland selected the location of their lynching: directly across the street from the Holbert home, in the front yard of a local black church.⁵ Such a decision was clearly designed to send a message; not only to the Holberts, but to blacks throughout the broader community. The torture subsequently endured by the couple could be described as nothing short of barbarous. According to a newspaper account of the lynching, the Holberts,

“...were tied to trees and while the funeral pyres were being prepared they were forced to suffer the most fiendish tortures. The blacks were forced to hold out their hands while one finger at a time was chopped off. Holbert was severely beaten, his skull was fractured, and one of his eyes, knocked out with a stick, hung by a thread from the socket. Neither the man nor woman begged for mercy, nor made a groan or plea. When the executioners came forward to lop off fingers, Holbert extended his hand without being asked. The most excruciating form of punishment, consisted in the use of a large corkscrew in the hands of some of the mob. This instrument was bored into the flesh of the man and the woman, in arms, legs and body, and then pulled out, the spirals tearing out big pieces of raw, quivering flesh, every time it was withdrawn. Even this devilish torture did not make the poor brutes cry out. When finally they were thrown onto the fire and allowed to be burned to death, this came to the relief of the maimed and suffering victims.”⁶

⁴ J. Todd Moya, Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). p. 9.

⁵ Ibid, p. 10

⁶ Vicksburg (Mississippi) Evening Post, February 8, 1904.

As had often been the case during slavery, the selection of location and decisions regarding the actions taken during the torture and murder of black men and women in Mississippi served a purpose beyond the simple punishment of the accused. By torturing the Holberts on the lawn of the black church, white Mississippians attempted to use violence and the threat of similar future acts of violence as a method of controlling the actions of blacks throughout the area.

Approximately fifty years later, the brutal murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi in 1955 shocked people across the United States. Placed within the historical context of violence and order (and disorder) in Mississippi, the brutal murder of Emmett Till, while no less horrific, follows certain familiar patterns. The infamous kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till remains among the more widely recounted acts of racial violence taking place in the years leading up to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Till, a 14 year-old Chicagoan, was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi during the summer of 1955. While in a grocery store, Till is accused of an “inappropriate” interaction with Carolyn Bryant, the white wife of the storeowner, Roy Bryant. There is dispute as to what transpired in the store with reports ranging from Till touching Bryant’s hand, whistling at her, or simply inadvertently whistling as a consequence of a speech

impediment. What subsequently occurred is, unfortunately, indisputable.⁷

Four days after the incident in the store, at 2:30 a.m., Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, kidnapped Till from the home of his great uncle, Moses Wright. After removing Till from the home, Bryant and Milam brutally beat Till beyond recognition, before dragging him to the banks of the Tallahatchie River, shooting him in the head, tying a seventy-five pound fan from a cotton gin around his neck to weigh him down, before ultimately discarding his body into the river.⁸

Bryant and Milam, along with the white community that supported their actions and acquitted them of all charges brought against them, understood that their acts of violence, like those of previous eras in Mississippi were designed to police the actions of black Mississippians and to reaffirm definitions of race, power, and order in Mississippi.⁹ However,

⁷ Following their acquittal in the case on charges of kidnapping and murder, despite having admitted to the sheriff that they took Till from Moses Wright's home and eyewitness testimony against the men by Wright and others, Bryant and Milam admitted to their involvement in the brutal murder of Emmett Till in an interview for an article in *Look Magazine* for \$4,000. For a discussion of the jury nullification and the desire/ability of southern all white juries to shield the perpetrators of lynching and racial violence from prosecution or conviction see Clay S. Conrad, *Jury Nullification: The Evolution of a Doctrine*. (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Academic Press, 1998).

⁸ For an overview of the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till, along with the subsequent responses both locally and nationally see Davis W. Houck and Matthew Grindy, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2008); Stephen Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Darryl Mace, *In Remembrance of Emmett Till* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014); and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Emmett Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil Rights Movement* (Troy, Michigan: Bedford Publishers, 1994).

⁹ A number of scholars have addressed the centrality of lynch law and "mob" violence in the history of the United States, a phenomenon not exclusively relegated to the South or the "frontier." For examples see Christopher Waldrep, *Lynching in America: A History in Documents* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006); and Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (New

responses to the brutal murder, through the actions of Till's mother, Mamie Till, and by blacks across the country outraged by what they saw in the mutilated teenager's body also paralleled actions from previous eras in Mississippi. As this project demonstrates, black Mississippians did not always read and respond to acts of violence in the ways that white Mississippians would have preferred. Rather than quelling unrest and dissatisfaction, violence and brutality in Mississippi often brought about direct challenges and resistance in return. Rather than restoring order, violence on the part of white Mississippians often brought about a response that took the form of a wave of disorder and unrest.¹⁰

It is clear that patterns of oppression and violence seen in Mississippi during the Civil Rights era often resembled those of the antebellum period. However, to simply contend that white Mississippians fought so stridently in defense of their closed society in the mid-twentieth century because things "had always been that way" assumes a sense of inevitability that oversimplifies the development and evolution of a complex society. As

York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield Press, 2011). An additional study by Harvey Young examines the relationship between violence and the use and abuse of the black body in order to reinforce ideas about racial hierarchy. For example, see Harvey Young, "The Black Body as Souvenir in American Lynching," *Theatre Journal*. Vol. 57, No. 4, Black Performance (December, 2005), pp. 639 – 657. For a visual understanding of lynching law and its place within the broader community see James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).

¹⁰ For an overview of the legacy of violence and resistance in Mississippi throughout the twentieth century see John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

national Civil Rights organizations continued their assault on Jim Crow and the abuses of the segregated South in the 1950s and 1960s, they understood that there was something “special” about Mississippi. It was clear that in order to break the hold of the Jim Crow South, it would first be necessary to break through in Mississippi. The men and women engaged in this struggle understood that the pushback by white Mississippians would be intense. They knew that the system of oppression would be well structured and coordinated; and while no group of individuals acts from a singular, shared pattern of thoughts, white Mississippian’s constructions of community and their conceptions of self and the “other” as they evolved over time, helped to shape a pattern of collective actions as the civil rights struggles played out in Mississippi.¹¹

It would be an oversimplification to assert a causal relationship between the culture of violence present in antebellum Mississippi and the Mississippi of Emmett Till, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman of the 1950s and 1960s. However, understanding the tensions present within the state from its earliest periods (both interracial and intra-

¹¹ For discussions of the social construction of race and the ways in which these constructions allowed for individuals and groups of people to label and define themselves and “others” (along with the potential impact of such constructions) see Barbara Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982); and George Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate of Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817 – 1914. (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1971).

racial) along with the centrality of fear and violence in the constructions and maintenance of Mississippi society allows for an understanding of how many of these practices developed and continued over time. The combination of Mississippi's emergence as a frontier plantation society, along with local and national shifts occurring beginning in the 1820s and 1830s as Mississippi's society developed and grew, placed unique pressures on local whites to shape and defend themselves, their wealth, and their communities from a series of perceived threats, real or imagined, internal or external. The ways that white Mississippian's viewed themselves and "outsiders," along with perceptions of the constant threat that the black population and their allies represented helped to create the closed society that came to characterize white identity in Mississippi.

Just as the legacies of white constructions of community and identity in Mississippi remained traceable to the state's antebellum roots, this was also the case for the black community in the state. Enslaved men and women did not simply survive the horrors of the brutal construction and evolution of Mississippi's slave society, but rather shaped their own identities and communities within that system. Additionally, enslaved men and women constantly pushed back against the constraints that the emerging system of slavery placed upon them. This pushback consequently helped to

shape the actions taken by whites in constructing their slave society and the broader society itself. As Eugene Genovese (ironically) points out in Roll, Jordan, Roll, “U. B. Phillips – of all people-“ acknowledged that slaveholders understood the threat that enslaved men and women represented, despite claims as to their docility, and that this understanding influenced actions and policy.¹² According to Phillips,

“A great number of southerners at all times held the firm belief that the negro population was so docile, so little cohesive, and in the main so friendly toward the whites and so contented that a disastrous insurrection by them would be impossible. But on the whole, there was much greater anxiety abroad in the land than historians have told of, and its influence in shaping southern policy was much greater than they have appreciated.”¹³

Understanding these tensions between blacks and whites and within each group allows for a more complex understanding of the society that ultimately emerged.

Any attempt to reconstruct and analyze antebellum Mississippi society requires a focus on both the institution of slavery and the effects of life on the edges of what remained an emerging frontier. Unlike other slave states that experienced the growth and development of racially based slavery over time, the settlement and development of Mississippi coincided with massive

¹² Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made. (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 595.

¹³ “Racial Problems, Adjustments and Disturbances,” Ulrich Bonnell Phillips. Edited with an Introduction by Eugene Genovese, The Slave Economy of the Old South: Selected Essays in Economic and Social History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) p. 236.

westward migration and a substantial growth in cotton production, linking the state's earliest settlement to enslaved labor.¹⁴ In many senses, differences in time and space help to explain differences in the development of these various southern slave societies.¹⁵ There may very well be numerous similarities, for example, between the emergence and development of South Carolina and Mississippi, as each society emerged closely linked to the growth and production of staple crops and reliance upon an immense enslaved labor force. Likewise, at the time of settlement, each could be viewed as frontier societies. However, distinctions in both the local and national conditions under which each emerged helps to explain, at least in part, the varying patterns of growth and development that took place.¹⁶

¹⁴ In order to gain insight into the evolution of the system of slavery and its emergence in earlier Colonial America, see T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, Myne Owne Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640 – 1676 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). The early nineteenth century westward migration and the interrelated domestic slave trade, along with the ways in which they impacted the lives of enslaved men and women, slaveholders and regional and national economies can be seen in Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Edward E. Baptist, The half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 2014); and Joshua Rothman, Race in the Atlantic World: Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner addresses such differences in 1893 in a speech presented in Chicago at the World Columbian Exposition on the "Frontier Thesis" stating that, "But with all these similarities there are essential differences, due to the place element and the time element." Speech entitled, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Reprinted in Allan G. Bogue, "Frederick Jackson Turner Reconsidered." The History Teacher, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Feb., 1994), p. 197.

¹⁶ For an overview of the emergence of the slave society in South Carolina (which held similarities in terms of its link to the institution of slavery while varying greatly in terms of time), see Peter H. Wood, Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion (New York: Knopf, 1974)

As such, it would be overly determinative to simply explain Mississippi's development as a consequence of its legacy as a frontier slave society. Frederick Jackson Turner, who is best known for his "Frontier Thesis" and the contention that American "exceptionalism" resulted from its engagement with, and conquest of the frontier, argued that out of the confrontations with the elements of the frontier (native "savages," animals, the terrain, and other frontiersmen), America developed its primary characteristics of individualism and democracy. Without question, the environment and conditions of the frontier in antebellum Mississippi played an instructive role, dictating the forms of production and labor as well as the crops to be produced and on what scale. However, along this Mississippi frontier, the major tensions to be overcome related most directly to threats to the institution of slavery. Native Americans and the physical environment remained significant concerns, but for arriving planters and their subordinates (the frontiersmen of antebellum Mississippi) the focus of their efforts remained their enslaved men and women and any individual or mechanisms that might prove to threaten the stability of the slave system. While Jackson's writings ignore the significance of enslaved men and women in the conquest of the frontier and the development of the

subsequent society, in Mississippi their presence and significance is undeniable.¹⁷

Ultimately, local and national conditions impacted the evolution of Mississippi's "exceptionalism," creating a society with certain traits traceable throughout the subsequent century. However, in this case exceptional must be defined as "unique," without the requisite implications of difference suggesting superiority as Turner implied. The conditions, both nationally and regionally, (including the mixtures of peoples and cultures) produced a system and culture with certain distinct characteristics. No attribute seems more central to the culture of antebellum Mississippi than that of an underlying presence of violence or the threat of violence, and its role in structuring the actions of both enslaved and free people throughout the state.¹⁸

The very nature of this project, as an attempt to analyze and understand the development of antebellum Mississippi dictates that at its core it seeks also to understand the institution of slavery within the state. Ulrich B. Phillips, in many ways, set the initial parameters for debates

¹⁷ For discussion of Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" and the absence of adequate recognition of African Americans in his analysis see Margaret Washington, "African American History and the Frontier Thesis," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 13. No. 2. (Summer, 1993), p. 230 – 232.

¹⁸ Richard Slotkin effectively links Turner's images of the frontier to a culture of violence in the American experience in Richard Slotkin, Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600 – 1860 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

regarding the nature of slavery and of enslaved men and women in 1918 when he published American Negro Slavery.¹⁹ As a southern born historian publishing in the first quarter of the twentieth century it should not be surprising that Phillips took an approach to the subject heavily laden with negatively biased assumptions about African Americans.²⁰ Many of the arguments found within American Negro Slavery served as the foundation for the paternalist arguments that came to be expressed more explicitly in studies on American slavery beginning in the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ Phillip's work did not go unchallenged, but his image of American slavery and of enslaved men and women dominated the field among scholars for nearly forty years.²²

In 1956, Kenneth Stamp published The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South. Stamp, in a point-by-point rebuttal of Phillips, believed he was filling a void that existed in understandings of North

¹⁹ Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment, and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the plantation Regime (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), and Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929).

²⁰ According to Phillips, innate attributes of laziness and infantilism made slavery unprofitable. Throughout his work, Phillips depicts a benign system of slavery symbolized by the give-and-take relationships between slaveholders and the enslaved. Phillips asserts that slaves remained content with their lot due to their childlike, docile nature. Such characteristics, he contends, led enslaved men and women to believe that they would ultimately benefit from their enslavement.

²¹ See Eugene Genovese, The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); and Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

²² Carter G. Woodson, for example, wrote in 1919 of Phillips' "shortcomings" in American Negro Slavery, arguing that it demonstrated "his inability to fathom the negro mind, his failure to bring out the cycles of the history of slavery, and a tendency to argue to the contrary when facts seemed to be unfavorable to the slaveholders." See C. G. Woodson, "Review of American Negro Slavery" in The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Vol. 5. No. 4 (March, 1919), p. 481.

American slavery. Stamppp hoped to present a more “objective” view of the institution and its people. Stamppp expressed this sentiment writing, “I have assumed that the slaves are merely ordinary human beings, that innately Negroes are, after all, only white men in black skins, nothing more, nothing less. This gives quite a new and different meaning to the bondage of black men; it gives their story a relevance to men of all races which it never seemed to have before.”²³

Stamp set himself apart from many scholars who preceded him by focusing on the lives of the enslaved. Perhaps in part due to his desire to directly refute Phillips’ assertions, Stamppp relied on the plantation manuscripts, farm journals, court records, newspapers, and travel journals used by Phillips rather than slave narratives or former slave interviews conducted by the Federal Writers Project. As such, he is forced to re-evaluate the evidence presented by Phillips rather than presenting new evidence from these sources which Phillips failed to use.²⁴

²³ Kenneth B. Stamppp, The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South (New York: Knopf, 1956), pp. vii-viii.

²⁴ In fairness to Phillips, it must be noted that the interviews conducted by the Federal Writers Project did not take place until long after the publication of his work. However, slave narratives and certain other sources from the perspective of the enslaved men and women were available. In the decades following the publishing of The Peculiar Institution, scholars began to use slave narratives and WPA interviews to great effect beginning with such texts as George P. Rawick, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972); and including more recent texts such as Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul: Life in the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Throughout the book, Stampp emphasizes the brutality of the system of slavery as well as of those involved in its maintenance. In addition, he counters many of the images Phillips produced. Enslaved men and women, according to Stampp, were not “naturally suited” for slavery as had been previously argued. Likewise, their presumed child-like personalities, work habits and physical attributes did not imply that slavery was their intended position. Slavery was, at its base, a forced condition. The slave South was not a place of leisure for planters and their “lazy” slaves. Above all else, slavery was about labor, and the planters demanded of their slaves a “full stint of labor from ‘day clean’ to first dark.”²⁵

Stampp contends that slavery was a system filled with tensions and strife. The institution did not run smoothly based on the system of give and take as suggested by Phillips. In chapter three, entitled “A Troublesome Property,” Stampp detailed the ways in which slaves constantly attempted to undermine the system of slavery through day-to-day resistance. Stampp insists throughout this chapter that enslaved men and women were not content with their lot in slavery and thus worked in whatever ways possible to obtain their freedom. Though Stampp provides a strong rebuttal to the assertions of slavery presented by Phillips and other scholars, the major

²⁵ Stampp, Peculiar Institution, 81.

weakness in his response is that he allows the debate to be fought on the grounds laid out by Phillips. Despite the plethora of scholarship over the subsequent decades challenging Phillips and Stamp, Phillips' scholarship continued to define the trajectory in the academy.

Kenneth Stamp's work directly refuted two major points of emphasis found in Phillip's work by demonstrating that the institution of slavery proved to be both a brutal and profitable system. In attempting to address a similar set of questions, Stanley Elkins expanded on Stamp's arguments regarding the brutality of the system, reaching the conclusion that the system proved so brutal as to ultimately destroy enslaved people's links to their cultural pasts and leave these enslaved men and women as blank slates dependent upon their enslavers for culture and identity. A number of works soon followed, all more or less structuring their arguments along the lines created by Phillips. It is in the power to shape the debate, more so than in the conclusions reached, where the import of his work rests.²⁶

²⁶ See for example Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1977), Herbert G. Gutman, Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1975), Paul A. David, Herbert G. Gutman, Richard Sutch, Peter Temin, and Gavin Wright, Reckoning With Slavery: A Critical Study in the Quantitative History of American Negro Slavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), John Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), George P. Rawick, From Sunup to Sundown: The Making of the Black Community (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), Leslie Howard Owens, This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), and Herbert G. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

Debates concerning the nature of slavery and the lives of enslaved men and women followed a similar trajectory beginning in the 1970s. In Roll, Jordan, Roll: the World the Slaves Made, Eugene Genovese presented a paradigm on the nature of slavery built, substantially, on the foundation laid by U. B. Phillips.²⁷ Though the two works varied greatly in style and complexity, in terms of substance, Genovese's paternalist arguments relied heavily on similar assumptions as to the nature of enslaved men and women and their "relationships" with their masters. As with Phillips, Genovese received both praise and criticism over the subsequent decades.²⁸ As had also been the case with American Negro Slavery, subsequent decades saw

²⁷ Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1976).

²⁸ Among the early criticisms of Genovese's paternalist paradigm and his efforts to distance his work from that of Phillips is a paper presented by Kenneth M. Stampp in 1966 at the American Historical Association annual meeting. In the paper Stampp addresses Genovese's contention that Phillips' work represents the "best and most subtle introduction to ..." and that American Negro Slavery comes about as close to greatness "as any historian this country has yet produced" while subsequently emphasizing his perceived weaknesses in the text. However, as Stampp continues, he emphasizes that, "the trouble with this, of course, is that Genovese wants to play Hamlet without Hamlet, for what he objects to in Phillips are interpretations that are central in his writings." Kenneth M. Stampp, "Reconsidering U. B. Phillips: A Comment," reprinted in *Agricultural History*, Vol. 41. No. 4 (October, 1967), pp. 365-368.

Herbert Gutman similarly challenges Genovese's contentions in The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom stating that the "Evidence in Roll, Jordan Roll that the typical slave viewed himself or herself as bound in an 'organic' relationship with an owner – the study's essential argument – is scant. The illustrations which serve to show 'the recurring idea of mutual obligation in an organic relationship,' moreover, are often strained. Instances of kindness and sympathy by some ex-slaves toward their old owners, for example, are described as having 'fitted within long-established paternalist patterns' and as revealing older 'organic' ties in a new setting." According to Gutman, Genovese fails to demonstrate that such "long-established patterns" existed. Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, p. 312. Gutman further argues that "Slaves often compromised with their owners. Compromise was a necessary and realistic strategy for survival. But the frequent compromises slaves had to make are not in themselves evidence that the slaves viewed themselves as bound in an 'organic' relationship with their owners. Nor are they evidence that the slaves had internalized their rulers' 'hegemony.' 'Organic' relationships do not exist; at best, they develop over time. So does the transformation of power into authority." Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, p. 319.

numerous books over the subsequent decades rooted in the paternalist arguments presented by Genovese.²⁹

I contend that attempts to analyze and understand the institution of slavery and the men and women involved in that system (enslaved men and women as well as their enslavers) have been most significantly impacted by Genovese's paternalist arguments through allowing the debate to be held on his terms. As evidenced by the immense scholarship over the past decades, innumerable examples can be found that, in isolation or combined with like examples, suggest the viability of different arguments regarding the impact and meaning of "relationships" between masters and their slaves. However, rather than focusing on such "relationships," more insight and understanding can be gained through examining how each group defined itself and created images of the "other." These definitions shaped their interactions with each other and the subsequent development of the institution of slavery and their society.

²⁹ See for example, Albert Rabateau, Slave Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), Charles Joyner, Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), Deborah Gray White, Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), James Oakes, Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1990), Peter Kolchin, American Slavery (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), Walter Johnson, Soul By Soul: Inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, Slavery and the Making of America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Joshua Rothman, Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), Walter Johnson, River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), and Edward Baptist, The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

At its core, this project seeks to address the question, "What made Mississippi 'Mississippi'?" This project looks at the formation of Mississippi's society, focusing on the construction of community and ideas about self and "other" more so than the formal structures and institutions often associated with community building. The legal, social, political, and economic institutions that emerged in antebellum Mississippi became, at least in part, tools to be used by whites in defense of the constructions of community defined out of shared interactions associated with an emerging frontier slave society in an era of shifting national tensions and debates. Defining "Mississippi" and understanding what factors helped to shape its early foundation, aids in understanding how the culture of violence continued to remain central to the region in decades well after the conclusion of slavery. While slavery and the need for control and order associated within the institution clearly fed into the region's violence, this study maintains that the violence of antebellum Mississippi's broader community shaped the violence within the system of slavery just as much as the use of violence flowed in the opposite direction.

Two large scale incidents of violence and unrest during the summer of 1835 rest at the center of this project. In the first incident, taking place in July 1835 in and around Vicksburg, Mississippi, local whites beat, killed,

and ran off numerous white Mississippians defined simply as “gamblers.” Likewise, in an incident overlapping in time, white citizens in Livingston and Clinton, Mississippi beat, killed, and ran off numerous white Mississippians along with a number of enslaved men and women suspected of plotting a massive slave insurrection.³⁰ Through examining the actions taken in these two communities and the ways in which local whites justified their actions, one gets a sense as to the process through which communities in Mississippi defined and constructed themselves and how those definitions laid the foundation for the state’s character and identity moving forward.

Chapter One, entitled “Constructing the “Other”: Myths and Violence in the Creation and Maintenance of Mississippi Society,” looks at constructions of community in antebellum Mississippi through a focus on Vicksburg, Mississippi. This chapter examines constructions of “self” and “other” and views the ways in which such designations allowed for the inclusion or exclusion of various individuals and groups of people. Those deemed to be a threat to shared values and mores quickly saw themselves pushed to the periphery of the community. The process of “othering” as seen in this chapter was not constructed solely through ideas of race. Slavery, however, remained a central focus, as those who expressed an

³⁰ Clinton, Mississippi is located slightly over 30 miles east of Vicksburg, Mississippi.

ability or desire to interact too freely with the enslaved population came to be viewed and treated as a menacing threat. Community images and the creation of myths served to define the community and to justify the actions taken against those viewed as outsiders. As this chapter demonstrates, these definitions of “self” and “other” did not simply produce abstract concepts of various people, but resulted in extreme acts of violence committed by one group of white Mississippians against other white Mississippians. The violence that ensued demonstrated the ways in which local whites sought to use violence and fear as a coercive force in order to structure or restrict behavior, even among whites within the region.

In Chapter Two, entitled “The ‘Other’ Within: Community and Identity Among Mississippi’s Enslaved People,” the focus shifts more directly to the institution of slavery and the enslaved population. Just as “othering” took place among whites in antebellum Mississippi, so, too was the case between blacks and whites. By looking at the emergence of slavery in Mississippi from the perspective of enslaved men and women such as Israel Campbell, it becomes clear that both blacks and whites in Mississippi took part in this process of defining one’s self and others. As a consequence of these designations, tensions grew between the two groups. Enslaved men and women constantly made efforts to create their own identities and to push

back against the constraints of slavery. Such actions served as reminders to white Mississippians as to the threat that this discontented enslaved population represented. This perspective does not support the image of simple victimization on the part of enslaved men and women, but rather demonstrates growing tensions that help to explain the “rational paranoia” felt by whites throughout the slave society of Mississippi. Though the abusive actions taken by white Mississippians was clearly not justifiable, the fears that often led to extreme acts of brutality can be understood through examining the interactions between blacks and whites and the ways that they viewed one another over the years leading up to the suspected insurrectionary plot.

Chapter Three, entitled “A Deadly Mix: Violence, Fear, and Insurrection in Antebellum Mississippi,” returns the focus of the text to the summer of 1835; focusing on the discovery, “investigation,” and reactions to a suspected slave insurrection in and around Clinton and Livingston, Mississippi. Unlike in Vicksburg where the community focused on a group of outsiders (white men) deemed to be “others,” in investigating the potential insurrection, the local citizenry focused its attention on the group of men and women resting at the very center of their slave society. In order to justify the process of investigation and the actions taken in response, local

whites used a similar process of myth making as seen in Vicksburg. In order to paint this internal “other” in a manner worthy of an extreme and often brutal response, local whites created images of enslaved men and women capable of being docile, ignorant, and childlike yet also savage and ruthless, fully willing and capable of coordinating a massive deadly assault on their slave society.

As the investigation and violence spread, so too did the size and scope of the imagined threat, ultimately coming to include white involvement along with that of the enslaved population. These white men, some themselves owners of slaves, were quickly written out of the community, portrayed as menacing threats to order and the stability of the community. As the size and scale of the threat grew to include whites as well as blacks, local citizens demonstrated the ways in which individual slaveholders willingly (and effectively) coordinated their efforts with one another, backed by many of the region’s non-slaveholding whites, along with the sanction and open support of various state mechanisms. As in Vicksburg, violence and the threat of further violence became tools used to punish those believed to be involved in the threat as well as a tool to limit the potential for future unrest.

Chapter Four, entitled “‘The Regulators Need Regulating:’ Mississippi’s Violence and (Dis)Order within a National Context,” places the suspected slave insurrection and the responses of Mississippi whites within the broader national context of the era. The 1820s and 1830s witnessed a great deal of escalating tensions across the nation often grounded in the discourse of the slavery debate. The publishing of David Walker’s Appeal in 1829, William Lloyd Garrison’s founding of the anti-slavery newspaper, The Liberator, in 1831, Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831, the establishment of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, and finally all demonstrated the presence of a rising anti-slavery sentiment among a portion of the American populace. The rise of the abolitionist movement throughout the 1830s witnessed a parallel escalation of southern justifications in defense of slavery as a “positive good”.³¹ This chapter examines the emerging national discourse as played out in Mississippi and the ways in which the actions and justifications of Mississippi whites impacted debates on the nature of slavery. It also raises questions regarding the place of “Lynch Law” and mob rule in an American society grounded on the premise of equal justice under the law. In dealing with perceived threats

³¹ John C. Calhoun of South Carolina most effectively presents the defense of slavery as a “positive good”. See John C. Calhoun, “Slavery a Positive Good,” Speech to the United States Senate, 1837.

to their lives and to their system of slavery, Mississippi whites were often forced to choose between the law and what they believed to be “justice.”

This chapter also continues to follow the events taking place within Mississippi leading to the eventual end of open investigation and violence. As tensions continued to rise throughout the month of July, both internally and externally, the levels of brutality increased as well, before finally reaching a tipping point. Local whites did not question their right to punish those they believed to be taking part in the suspected plot. However, over time, some came to question whether or not those charged with restoring order (through violence) were themselves becoming an uncontrollable element in the community. In mid-July, one observer summed up the rising risks succinctly, simply stating, “The regulators need regulating.”³²

This project seeks to provide an understanding of antebellum Mississippi society, not through an examination of the “relationships” formed between enslaved and free Mississippians, but instead by examining each group’s self identities. Focusing on constructions of identity (as individuals and communities, enslaved and free), the ways in which individuals and communities defined “self” and “other”, and the fluid, often

³² MDAH “Letter from Dr. William H. Thomson to his wife,” July 12, 1835 from Hinds County, Mississippi. John A. Murrell Clippings.

changing nature of those definitions, helps to explain the behavior and interactions that took place between various communities and within each. These constructions in turn laid the foundation for the culture of violence that came to rest at the heart of Mississippi society.

CHAPTER 2

CONSTRUCTING THE “OTHER:” MYTHS AND VIOLENCE IN THE CREATION AND MAINTENANCE OF MISSISSIPPI SOCIETY

Over a three week period beginning in late June of 1835, the citizens of Hinds, Warren, and Madison Counties, Mississippi hung, lynched, whipped or ran off dozens of men, black and white, slave and free. Without hesitation, members of these local communities coalesced in defense against elements they viewed as threatening to the values and mores upon which they defined their society. The response was both deliberate and violent; marked by a sense of organization and coordination, which only added to the brutality exacted upon their victims. Two events rest at the center of this violence: the eradication of white gamblers and outlaws deemed threatening to the stability of the local populace, and the brutal response to the perceived imminence of a slave conspiracy that local whites believed held designs on creating chaos from Mississippi to Florida.³³ The number of deaths

³³ The vast scale of the perceived conspiracy is mentioned in a number of discussions of the uprising made during the investigation and its immediate aftermath. See, for example Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) “Affairs in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, August 8th, 1835, MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, October 17th, 1835. Similar descriptions are also found in writings from later periods. Harnett T. Kane, *Natchez on the Mississippi*, (New York: William Morrow and Company), p. 73, James Lal Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1981), David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), and Joshua D. Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

associated with these two events is unclear; however, there is no dispute as to the savagery exemplified in the actions of the local white populations of Mississippi.

From an external view, whether in terms of time (looking back on the events historically) or space (as perceived by northerners and abolitionists in the days and weeks following the events), the actions taken by the townspeople of Mississippi appeared extraordinary and extreme. However, when viewed from within the context of the communities and cultures of antebellum Mississippi engaged in these responses, these acts appear neither exceptional nor surprising. The size and scale of the reactions to these perceived threats undoubtedly exceeded those from other times and situations. However, they clearly fit within a structure and a framework established within a tradition of violent enforcement of community values, fully supported by the entire structure of the local citizenry.

Though the events surrounding these two episodes occurred nearly simultaneously and in close proximity to each other, I believe that it is essential to examine them separately, rather than in conjunction with each other. Many historians have pointed to the violent summer of 1835 as an important marker in understanding the development and evolution of antebellum Mississippi. However, most have chosen to focus directly on the

response to the insurrectionary plot in and around Madison County while neglecting to examine similar events in Vicksburg directed towards white outsiders. Such an analysis tends to shift the focus more heavily towards issues of slavery and race and away from the violent foundations of the community. Without the broader context of regional events, both connected to and separate from slavery, one is led to believe that the issue of slavery alone serves as the source of the intense violence.³⁴ However, viewing the period within a broader context suggests that, though slavery clearly exacerbated the levels of violence, it does not create it.

Those scholars who choose to discuss both the gambling incident and the suspected slave insurrection tend to do so in a manner that conflates the two. Generally, the insurrectionary plot remains the central point of emphasis, and unrelated violence against white gamblers in Vicksburg simply merges into the narrative of this event. Rather than separate events where white Gamblers across the state suffered similar retribution as those believed to be associated with the slave uprising, historians have often described these gamblers as the instigators and organizers of the plot;

³⁴ See for example Bradley Bond, *Political Culture in the Nineteenth Century South: Mississippi 1830-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 93. Bond argues that southern planters were motivated by material interests that dictated their responses to threats to slavery. As such, he discusses the “Madison County Massacre” as an example of their responses to such threats, but fails to connect them to the events taking place in Vicksburg.

thereby morphing two incidents into one.³⁵ However, accounts of the two events, written at the time, do not support such an analysis. Newspapers and letters describing the events in Vicksburg made no mention of the slave insurrection taking place in Madison and surrounding counties. Likewise, it is not until local citizens begin searching for justifications for the violent response to the uprising that they begin to mention the possible presence of outside influences. Such an approach, perhaps unintentionally, lessens the agency of the enslaved population. It is a dubious claim to suggest the imminence of an uprising of the size and scale described in some recollections of the events. However, the presence of tensions and unrest among the enslaved population is clear; and, as such, to create a narrative which negates the possibility of such self inspired, self designed plans for unrest within the enslaved community simply feeds into the myth of the content slave promulgated by whites of the Old South.

Much of the recent scholarship, while also focusing most directly on the response to the slave uprising, views the reactions to these threats as core building blocks in the creation of community in white Mississippi. Laurence Shores contends that the absence of community structures such as churches,

³⁵ See for example Edwin A. Miles' "The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835," *Journal of Negro History* (1957); Davison Burns McKibben "Negro Slave Insurrections in Mississippi, 1800-1865," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXIV (1949), pp.73-90; and Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 155.

schools and temperance societies explains why the people of Madison County reacted so violently to the threat. Local people came together in order to protect what they considered to be their “preserved and cherished values.”³⁶ Christopher Morris makes a similar argument in “An Event in Community Organization: The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835.” He contends that the threat forced each local community to organize, not only in defense against the presence of internal unrest, but also to allow for the expansion of social networks in surrounding communities. In essence, the committees and organizations formulated to put down the insurrection played the role of creating local communities able to provide checks against each other, and thus limit the possibility of violence spreading. Members of one neighborhood, he contends, tended to question and distrust those from surrounding areas until the formation of broader committees demonstrated shared concerns and responses.³⁷

I agree that much of the violence resorted to in response to these threats emanated from a desire to “preserve” their “cherished values.” However, these episodes of violence were not transformational in the development of community, but rather accentuated the definitions of

³⁶ Laurence Shore, “Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery: the Insurrectionary Panic of 1835,” in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, eds. *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 96-98, p. 100, p. 119-20.

³⁷ Christopher Morris, “An Event in Community Organization: The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835,” *Journal of Social History* 22 (fall 1988): 93-111.

community already in existence. Those who considered themselves part of the community, and possessed the power to effectively police and control it, used such “opportunities” as the uprising and gamblers incidents to push those out who would not willingly or fully conform. While these regions may have lacked the civic infrastructure of a modern community, such as schools or churches, the local people viewed themselves as a singular, communal unit. Rather than focusing on the presence or absence of various organizational structures, one can best determine and understand the presence of a sense of an organic community through an examination of the manner in which the townspeople defined themselves in opposition to those they identified as outside their community. The white townspeople defined themselves directly in contrast to the images they applied to these “others,” whether white or black and whether based on real differences or the creation of myths and legends. The nature of how resident townspeople defined themselves in opposition to “others” is central to understanding the speed and severity of their response to the threats and explains the violence as not so much reactionary as a consciously selected method of control.

Throughout antebellum Mississippi, slavery was both an economic force and socio-cultural presence that structured local communities. Men and women within these communities developed a variety of relationships,

generally formed within the context of the institutional realities of enslavement. Included within this nexus were relationships between planters and slaves, as well as relationships among those whose work served to connect them economically to the system, including merchants, overseers, blacksmiths, and the like. Also incorporated within this web of inclusiveness were those who, though not directly linked to the slave system in an economic sense, remained involved by playing a protective role within the community in terms of monitoring the system; those who served formally on local slave patrols as well as those involved less formally, simply as the eyes and ears of communities.³⁸ Whether or not directly involved with the institution of slavery, or directly benefiting from the wealth it produced, these local citizens grew to see themselves as intricately tied to the maintenance of slavery and that which the system represented, both economically and culturally.

Understanding who the local citizens of antebellum Mississippi viewed as being within their communities is most clearly expressed through an examination of those perceived as outsiders or those excluded from full

³⁸ As will be noted and discussed subsequently, there was a great deal of debate as to the quality and effectiveness of slave patrols in the years prior to 1835. These concerns became central to the arguments for securing the regions in the decades leading up to the Civil War. See for example Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). For discussion of the formation of slave patrols in Mississippi during the 1830s see Kevin Dougherty, *Weapons of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), p. 56.

acceptance and participation within the society. Groups and individuals often define themselves through juxtaposition with those considered different or alien. Their collective definition of self is based on shared commonalities that accentuate differences between themselves and these secondary groups.³⁹ In terms of antebellum Mississippi, historical scholarship aptly applies the term “other” when describing people of African descent and Native Americans within the society. The socio-economic status and apparent physical and cultural differences between these two groups and white Mississippians served as the basis upon which whites defined them as alien or “other.” As such, they were outsiders to the community despite their often-central roles in the society’s maintenance, development, and survival. Consequently, local white citizens viewed these men and women not only with suspicion but often with a sense of contempt and superiority.

Ultimately, such distrust and contempt extended beyond African Americans or Native peoples. In many senses, resident Mississippians viewed transient whites and those who refused or were unable to conform to community mores as an even more menacing threat; constructing them as

³⁹ See, for example, George Fredrickson *Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) and Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History” in J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, *Region, Race and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) for discussions of the “other” and its role in the creation of community and hierarchy.

perhaps more “alien” than enslaved men and women who the community claimed to know and understand.⁴⁰ Local communities throughout Mississippi began to view a number of differing groups of white people in this manner. Partly because of its frontier nature in the early nineteenth century, Mississippi became a haven for a number of small-time gamblers, outlaws (both petty and renowned), steam doctors, slave thieves, horse thieves, as well as numerous vagrant whites from other areas who flowed into the Mississippi Delta in search of work and wealth.⁴¹ These men moved openly throughout the community. Their actions, sometimes nefarious and sometimes benign, often included interaction with the local enslaved population. The inability of the local populace to control their actions or to force them to accept the racial and cultural mores of the area quickly pushed these outsiders to the edges of the society. Ultimately, even these outlying regions of the community became insufficient, and the citizenry began to push for the complete removal of this “threatening” element.

⁴⁰ This is not to suggest, however, that the local people in any way underestimated the immense threat posed by enslaved men and women to the lives of local whites and to the system of slavery. Despite the protestations of innumerable whites in various papers and journals as to the docility of Southern slaves, their personal diaries and other writings belie the fact that the threat posed by this disaffected group of men and women was immense and ever present. Frederick Law Olmsted, The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States (London: Sampson, Low, Son & Co., 1862).

⁴¹ John Hope Franklin argues similarly that the migration of “fugitives from justice and rascals of every description” would occur in newly settled or frontier regions of the South. See John Hope Franklin, The Militant South: 1800-1861. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1956), p. 24. See also, Joshua D. Rothman, Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

These men on the edges of the community gained reputations, both real and imagined, which invoked a sense of fear, disgust, and discomfort among the local citizenry. Local accounts of the actions of these roving outlaws emphasized their ruthless and cunning nature and accentuated their perceived threat to the community. It was not enough to express the difference between local residents and these outsiders. In order to sufficiently explain and justify their exclusion from the inner portions of society in the public mind these men became agents of destruction, with designs on disrupting the lives of individuals and dismantling their beloved Southern society.⁴² This should not suggest, however, that Mississippians simply created the menacing presence of these outlaw figures. Clearly, from the viewpoint of the local citizenry these outsiders served as a real and substantial threat. Local citizens believed that their presence and activities placed numerous individuals, and in the certain instances, communities at significant risk.⁴³

⁴² James Lal. Penick discusses the construction of myths regarding these outlaws in his work on the life of well-known outlaw, John Murrell as he seeks to explain the connections between legend and history, and “how was an indifferent thief transformed into a master criminal.” James Lal Penick, Jr. The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1981), p. 8.

⁴³ As will be discussed more fully in subsequent portions of the project, the gambling activities in Vicksburg and Natchez created areas that came to be associated with theft and violence. These areas (The “Kangaroo” in Vicksburg and “Natchez-Under-the-Hill” in Natchez), were viewed by many as stains and threats to the communities. Men associated with these sections of town often found themselves on the edges of “respectable” society.

The rural nature of the region and the limited access to and from the population centers of Mississippi provided opportunity and cover for a growing cadre of outlaws and bandits. Within the wilderness which covered the vast majority of the state, three primary trails existed: the Natchez trace, which ran from Natchez to Nashville; the Three-Chopped Way, which ran from Natchez to Milledgeville, Georgia; and Jackson's Military Road, which ran from New Orleans to Nashville. These roadways provided the most direct routes throughout the region. However, they also provided the more unsavory sorts with a clear knowledge of what areas would be most heavily traveled, and therefore, what areas would provide the greatest opportunity for theft and mischief. These three roads, especially the Natchez Trace, developed reputations based as much upon their danger to travelers as upon their access to regions beyond the state. According to one source, "Outlaws and bandits roamed the forests, preying on traffic along these trails and celebrated their prowess in the notorious haunts of Natchez-Under-the-Hill."⁴⁴ Descriptions of the region and descriptions of these "dangerous" men ultimately became intricately connected in the public mind.

⁴⁴ Allen Cabiniss, *The Martyrs of Mississippi* (1942), p. 49. Natchez-Under-the-Hill is the section of Natchez heavily frequented by and assortment of gamblers, which gained a reputation extending throughout the southeastern United States. Its presence is most clearly pronounced when juxtaposed against Upper Natchez, an area where many of the South's wealthiest planters came to reside during the antebellum era.

However, it was also the case that the frontier nature of Mississippi society not only provided an opportunity for these outlaws, but also substantially shaped the mindset and mentality of the local populace. As one scholar of the political culture of antebellum Mississippi argues, these frontier conditions helped Mississippians develop clear definitions of liberty and citizenship, which embraced their lives on the frontier.⁴⁵ As such, individuals and local communities felt justified in defending themselves and their way of life; violently if necessary and clearly unchecked by what others might view as the traditional limitations of American law. Local people viewed these outlaws as a threat to their communities, but not as a threat that would go ignored or unchecked. As will become clear, evidence of this mindset presented itself throughout the region's development.

The ways in which the men and women of Mississippi discussed and described these outlaws provides insight into the mindset of the local populace, perhaps even more accurately than it helps describe the outlaws themselves. The often larger than life depictions of these outlaws along the Natchez Trace and other dangerous regions served not only as a warning to the local populace, but also a mechanism for defining a sense of self and

⁴⁵ Bradley Bond, *Political Culture in the Nineteenth Century South: Mississippi, 1830-1900*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), p. 15.

creating community through shared interests and a common threat.⁴⁶ Within the public discourse, these outlaws quickly transformed from petty gamblers or thieves into much more complex figures and as parts of a more complex organization.

Ultimately, however, local citizens did not solely accentuate the brutality or viciousness of these outlaws, though such traits remained prominently linked to their identities. These men and women created an image of outlaw groups, and especially of those believed to be the leaders, which entailed possessing a combination of immense physical strength and an immense intellect. They viewed them as deftly creative, well disciplined, and well organized. In addition, in a number of cases, in the public mind, these outlaws evolved into men of exceptional style and grace. Each of these traits, when viewed individually, held the potential of eliciting positive imagery. However, when combined in the creation of the outlaw myth of the Mississippi frontier, what emerged was an increasingly cunning and increasingly ominous group of men. Through the development of this often

⁴⁶ Laurence Shore makes a similar argument in his article "Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery" as he contends that the absence of community structures such as churches, schools, and temperance societies required the creation of shared values as a means through which a unified community could be created. In his opinion, however, these men and women viewed the threat of slave insurrection (as exemplified in the insurrection scare of 1835) as the value around which they most readily unified. Laurence Shore, "Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery: The Insurrectionary Panic of 1835," in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, eds. *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, CT), 1982. See also, Christopher Morris, "An Event in Community Organization: The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare." *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 22, No. 1, (Autumn 1988), pp. 93-111.

mythological outlaw figure, local Mississippians created firm and clear boundaries for inclusiveness and exclusion in their communities.

One account of these outlaws portrayed them as, “A host of desperados” who were “not only cheats at games of chance, but robbers, murderers, and felons of all crimes. They have their squads at all the principle points on the western rivers and carry on crimes of all sorts by the system.”⁴⁷ Local people contended that these men worked in concert with one another in order to promote their criminal acts as opposed to being an uncoordinated or loosely structured group of individual thieves. According to this viewpoint, their activities stretched throughout the region, and the threat to the local communities appeared to increase along with the rising complexity of their structure. The local citizenry viewed the existence of such a coordinated group of outlaws as being capable of challenging the very survival of these local communities. In the view of one newspaper account, “They [outlaws] have shown themselves too strong for the civil authorities, and have not hesitated to challenge anyone who dared to call them to account. No one’s life was safe who interfered with them.”⁴⁸

Another commentator on the perceived threat of this growing undesirable presence described them thusly:

⁴⁷ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” Niles Register, August 8, 1835, p. 401.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 402

“At this time, every boat that plied upon the western rivers was infested with gamblers, every village and town overrun with them. Reckless men, without hope or fear, they huddled together, setting all law both divine and human at defiance, and shielded their companions from the consequences of any act, however heinous. Their only argument was the Bowie knife, their only rejoinder the pistol-bullet.”⁴⁹

Such a statement emphasized their belief in the overwhelming presence of these outlaws throughout the region and accentuated the outlaws’ complete disregard for the law and public authority. From the perspective of the local populace, little doubt existed in terms of the immensity of these outlaw groups or the severity of their threat. The perceived extremity of this threat, in many ways, explains the intensity and rapid nature of the responses on the part of the local communities towards actions taken by those defined as outlaws.

The public formed important images of individual outlaws (usually those believed to be the leaders) as well. No singular figure better demonstrates the creation of this combination of the menacing, yet admirable figure than the notorious outlaw, John Murrell. The ways in which Mississippians described Murrell, also known as the Great Western Land Pirate, exemplified the outlaw image that evolved in the public mind and public memory of the 1830s and for decades to follow. In the months

⁴⁹ “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law, The American Whig Review (1850-1852); March 1851; 7,3. p. 213.

and years following his imprisonment for slave stealing in 1834, Mississippians came to associate Murrell's name with a variety of illicit activities, both real and imagined, across the southern United States.⁵⁰ Historian James Lal Penick, Jr., in his study of the life and legend of John Murrell, describes the outlaw succinctly as a "highwayman, a merciless killer, a horse thief, a counterfeiter, and a slave stealer."⁵¹ Such a description accentuates the threatening nature of this frontier outlaw. However, descriptions of Murrell are not limited to such menacing forms, as seen in a Tennessee newspaper which provided a physical description of Murrell in 1823, supplied by a deputy sheriff of Williamson County following Murrell's failure to appear in court to face charges of horse stealing. The deputy sheriff begins by labeling Murrell a "monstrous rascal" before continuing that "Said Murrell is about 5 feet 10 inches high, fair complexion, free spoken, blue eyes, black hair, tolerably well made, very good countenance, quite a nice looking fellow."⁵² As a young man of 18, Murrell's physical description appears very similar to the attractive figure of

⁵⁰ James Lal Penick, Jr. emphasizes the link between legend and history in his discussion of the life of John Murrell. He contends that one of the major motives of his book is examine the ways in which "an indifferent thief transformed into a master criminal." James L. Penick, Jr. The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1981), p. 8. As will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, Murrell is accused of being involved in activities far beyond those normally associated with outlaws, including his perceived role as the mastermind behind a massive slave insurrection.

⁵¹ Ibid, 1

⁵² Independent Gazette (Franklin, Tenn.), 26 December 1823.

legend that would ultimately spread throughout the region.⁵³ In a later official description of Murrell, given closer to the time of his final arrest in 1834, Murrell begins to take on a much less enchanting appearance, perhaps hardened by his life and experiences as an outlaw. As Penick suggests, by 1833 Murrell's appearance had shifted from that of a "nice looking fellow" to one "much pitted with the small pox."⁵⁴ Now, at age 28, an entry of the Convict Record described him as follows: "John A. Murrell...is five feet ten inches & a half in height & weight from one hundred fifty eight to one hundred & seventy pounds dark hair blue eyes long nose & much pitted with the small pox tolerably fair complexion."⁵⁵ What is perhaps most significant about this description of Murrell is the absence of exceptionalism found therein. He is neither extraordinarily menacing nor incredibly enchanting. He appears memorable as much for his long nose and apparent battle with small pox as for his physique or manner. Though openly described as a "monstrous rascal," there appears little in this expression of his appearance that is truly threatening about this John Murrell beyond that of a common criminal. In many senses, such descriptions allow for the creation of a sympathetic character. While hardened by the frontier, Murrell remained an

⁵³ James Penick, Jr. suggests that only two "authentic descriptions" of Murrell exist. James L. Penick, Jr. The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1981), p. 16.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 26

⁵⁵ MDAH, Madison County, Deed, 1832-1834, pp. 325-26.

individual with whom the people of Mississippi could relate. However, the legend of John Murrell, as developed by the people of Mississippi, lacks such opportunities for connection and he quickly became a man to be feared as much for his treachery as for his cunning and style.

Subsequent descriptions of the legendary Murrell emphasized the more flattering aspects of his physical appearance and disarming manner. Far from being viewed as an unkempt thief, one writer portrayed Murrell as “A racy, remarkably comely fellow” who had “deep eyes, a well-chiseled nose, and glistening blue-black hair. He dressed with a taste beyond that of the river gamblers, though he never stinted diamond studs, and his waistcoats showed many colors. The ladies loved him, and his taste in women was catholic.”⁵⁶ Murrell takes on the imagery of a heroic southern gentleman, while maintaining the threatening pose of an outlaw. The Murrell of legend possessed qualities to be both admired and feared. According to one nineteenth-century author, Murrell “possessed an indomitable energy, great quickness of perception, an unshaken nerve, a power to influence and control all with whom he came in contact, it is probable that under different circumstances, and unexposed to those temptations which early led him astray, he might have been an honor and a

⁵⁶ Harnett T. Kane, *Natchez on the Mississippi* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), p. 71.

blessing to his country in the council or in the field.”⁵⁷ Others made similar analyses, lamenting the potentially positive role Murrell could have played in society. O. S. Fowler furnishes one such response. According to Penick, Fowler worked as a renowned phrenologist who studied Murrell’s skull while in the Tennessee penitentiary.⁵⁸ In Fowler’s opinion, Murrell possessed strong character traits except in the area of justice.⁵⁹ Fowler opines that, had Murrell risen from less troubling conditions, he might very well have been “a superior scholar, scientific man, a lawyer, or a statesman.”⁶⁰

Despite such complimentary, yet lamenting depictions of Murrell, clear reasons remained for his congruent descriptions as a “monstrous rascal” and intimidating figure.⁶¹ The menacing nature of Murrell and other outlaws became evident beyond discussions of their appearances and personalities, reaching into the activities in which they engaged. Historical recollections of Murrell indicate his involvement in horse stealing, slave stealing, gambling, robbery, and murder. The Murrell of public memory was said to have engaged in the same sorts of activities, however, the

⁵⁷ Samuel A. Hammett, “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law,” *American Whig Review* 13 (March 1851) p. 217.

⁵⁸ Though now a discredited practice, phrenology was the nineteenth century practice of studying the bumps on an individual’s skull in order to make judgments about one’s character.

⁵⁹ Penick, Jr. *The Great Western Land Pirate*, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *National Police Gazette*, eds., *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate* (New York: H. Long & brother, 1847), p. 4.

⁶¹ *Independent Gazette* (Franklin, Tenn.), 26 December 1823.

complexity of his treachery, as well as the size and scope of his impact, vastly expanded. As such, Murrell came to be viewed as an individual not only capable of personally impacting individuals or a community through his actions, but he ultimately assumed the form of a man capable of coordinating and executing a massive slave insurrection designed to engulf the entirety of the southern United States, despite the fact that at the time of its presumed execution he remained restricted to the confines of the Tennessee State Penitentiary.⁶² Such was the impact of the persona created relating to John Murrell in particular, and to the frontier outlaw more generally conceived.

The legendary exploits of John Murrell and other outlaws most clearly took shape in discussions of their activities as horse thieves and slave thieves. As Penick points out in his historical study of John Murrell, descriptions of involvement in these activities contain a blending of historical accuracy and popular exaggeration. As purely historical actions, horse stealing and slave stealing proved to be a menace to the communities in which they took place. However, as tales of these exploits developed, the

⁶² The belief in such an immense reach and power on the part of Murrell and others as related to slave unrest in the region is an issue that will be addressed more fully in subsequent chapters. However, as it relates to the belief that Murrell's network of thieves remained involved in fomenting a regional slave uprising one local newspaper addresses the issue thusly, "It was ascertained that a general disaffection and the plan of an insurrection that had been spread among the Negroes, by a band of desperadoes that not only infested that section of the United States [Mississippi], but the whole country from Maryland to Louisiana." See "Transactions in Mississippi." Niles' Register, October 17, 1835.

crimes, and the images of those committing them, grew in scale and stature; becoming more than simple crimes against the community, and ultimately actions demonstrative of increasing cunning, and often sociopathic in nature. The levels of violence and complexity of these crimes increased the stature of these men, while continuing to fortify their image as threats to the community's survival.

The people of Mississippi treated slave stealing, or “negro stealing” with great seriousness and viewed it as a substantial threat to law and order as well as to the institution of slavery. In the case of a Mr. Johnson from Natchez, for example, conviction as a slave thief resulted in his being “condemned in that city,” and ultimately, “scheduled to be executed on the 31st.”⁶³ The article also suggests that a large number of men were engaged in the practice of stealing slaves. In this description, and many others from the period, commentators on the subject lament the slaves as “poor creatures” who “are enticed away from their homes, under the pretense to assist them to escape from thralldom” before being sold by their “pretend benefactors.”⁶⁴ Yet another account proclaims that even more horrific are

⁶³ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” *Niles’ Register*, August 8, 1835, p. 403. Interestingly, the article also mentions that the court tried and convicted a Mr. Clary at the same time, “but he received a new trial on the grounds that it was a mulatto, and not a negro, which he stole. The offenses are distinct under the statute.” The stealing of a mulatto slave, while still a crime, appears to have warranted a lesser punishment than the theft of a “negro” slave.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

the actions of those who “obtain a fee from slaves for promised assistance, and then murder their unsuspecting victims, throwing them into the Mississippi, with their bodies ripped open to make them sink, in order to prevent detection. What enormities will not the cursed love of self produce.”⁶⁵ Others suggested that slave thieves enticed their enslaved “victims” through “feeding the slaves on the tales about Toussaint L’Ouverture.”⁶⁶

The character of John Murrell helps to put an identity to the obscure figure of the slave thief. Murrell is depicted as having been a prominent slave thief, exemplifying both the cunning and brutality previously described. According to one account, Murrell

“Sidled up: Would Sam like to be free? Then meet him after dark at the turn...In the next town, after selling the Negro, he started off. A day or so later, Sam had escaped again and was riding by Murrell’s side. This went on until too many people were hunting the black man. Then Murrell blew out the victim’s brains. Now he had to find a new subject to carry on as before. Sometimes he captured a family of three or four, and had to shoot them all in the woods. From this worked a kind of Murrell underground railroad – a savage travesty on humanitarian organizations evolved to help slaves to freedom.”⁶⁷

In another example, Virgil A. Stewart, the man credited with having infiltrated Murrell’s clan and ultimately providing for his capture, writes of a

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ MDAH “The Martyrs of Mississippi” in Allan Cabiniss’ *Religion in the Making* (1942)

⁶⁷ Harnett T. Kane. *Natchez on the Mississippi* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), p. 71.

slave that he and another outlaw stole in Mississippi. In order to gain the cooperation of the enslaved man, the two men promised to transport him to a free state if he would allow them to sell him once while they were on their way. In addition, they agreed to give the man a portion of the money obtained in his sale. They sold him for six hundred dollars before meeting back up with him the following day after his escape from his new owner. After the successful venture, the slave thieves convinced the man to allow them to make a second sale as they rode through Tennessee. Again successful, they continued on their journey until becoming aware that people were beginning to search for them and their enslaved accomplice. Stewart concludes his description of these events by once again demonstrating the brutalities associated with the practice of stealing slaves. He states that “We took the Negro that night to the bank of a creek which runs by the farm of our friend, and Crenshaw shot him through the head. We took out his entails, and sunk him in the creek.”⁶⁸ Having disposed of the evidence, the two men continued northward out of the state.

Another notorious slave thief, John Steele, is portrayed as being less brutal, while equally creative in his methods. Steele was reported to have engaged in stealing slaves from one owner and selling them to a second

⁶⁸ U. B. Phillips, Documentary History of American Industrial Society: Plantation and Frontier, 1649 – 1863; Illustrative of Industrial History in the Colonial and Antebellum South (Cleveland, OH: The A. H. Clark Company, 1909), p. 63-4.

planter. He would subsequently steal those slaves from the new owner and return them to the initial owner in order to collect the reward.⁶⁹ These descriptions emphasize the viciousness of Murrell and other slave thieves, while also creating the image of a complexly developed scheme. Murrell is not simply moving from moment to moment victimizing those he comes across through happenstance. The outlaw created through this image is one who, through preparation and shrewdness creates a scheme through which he can continuously victimize both the enslaved population and their enslavers.

Such images are meant to vilify those engaged in the stealing of slaves. However, such portrayals proved to speak to the perceived mindset of enslaved men and women as well. These depictions are, in all probability, exaggerations of the acts of these slave thieves. They focus on the slaves as victims, all the while ignoring their state of victimization within the institution of slavery and the ways in which enslaved people's viewpoints of their situation shaped their desire to flee, with or without the assistance of these slave thieves. That these slave thieves remained able to "convince" enslaved men and women to acquiesce to being part of the various schemes concocted by the thieves speaks to the strong desire for

⁶⁹ Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate*, p. 80.

freedom on the part of enslaved people. In the minds of these men and women, the ability to take a chance at freedom with the assistance of an unknown outsider often held greater sway than “safely” remaining in their condition of forced servitude. What happens to these men and women is of secondary concern. Their desire to escape slavery, whether promoted through discussions with these slave thieves or simply among themselves, seems important in demonstrating the continuous presence of unrest among the enslaved population within this slave society. In addition, the prevalence of slave thieves, and the apparent willingness of slaves to take part in the practice, also helps to explain the growing fears held by white citizens in regards to interactions between their enslaved population and these “outsider” whites. Absent the belief (or knowledge) that enslaved men and women wished to terminate their condition as slaves, interactions with whites not viewed as a part of the community would have been perceived as far less threatening to the status and stability of the community. It was the enslaved population’s desire to seek freedom that led to the determination that unknown whites should be viewed as potential threats.

Mississippians viewed horse stealing as similarly disruptive as the stealing of slaves. This crime did not hold the possibility of a sentence for death, but the community clearly viewed it as a serious offense. Murrell,

who later gained a larger reputation for his exploits in stealing slaves, also served time for stealing horses. After serving a one-year sentence for the crime, “his thumbs were ordered burned with the letters HT – Horse Thief” and he was released.⁷⁰ However, in the case of horse thieves, the discomfort among the populace appears to have been less directly connected to the property being stolen and more focused on the interactions that took place between the enslaved population and these thieves. Many observers claimed that the presence of horse thieves and their discussions with enslaved men and women enticed enslaved men and women to seek their freedom. More than any other factor, the uncontrollable movements of these men throughout the countryside made them a threat to the stability of this slave society.⁷¹ Their freedom of movement and unmonitored contact with the

⁷⁰ Harnett T. Kane. Natchez on the Mississippi (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), p. 75.

⁷¹ Other groups of men with excessive freedom of movement throughout the community also came to be viewed as a threat. A prominent example, which will be examined in more detail in subsequent sections of this project, were men who came to be known as steam doctors. Steam doctors believed that illness could be cured through the cleansing of the body through immersing one’s self in steam and inhaling the vapors (often containing various herbs). Increasingly popular among poorer whites and enslaved people during the early nineteenth century, those who practiced this form of medicine gained a questionable reputation due in part to their continuous interaction among the enslaved population. Steam Doctors’ practices fell under the umbrella of the Thomsonian system of medicine, developed during the 19th century by Dr. Samuel Thomson. For a more detailed discussion of Steam Doctors see Benjamin Thompson, The Steam Doctor’s Defence: Exhibiting the Superiority of the Thomsonian System of Medicine, in Relieving and Curing Disease: Consisting of Facts and Abstracts, From the Writings of the Most Respectable Authors on the System: to Which is Added, Some Account of the Cholera, and Its Treatment on the Thomsonian Plan: With an Engraved Frontispiece. (Boston, 1838). See also William Henry Cook, The Physio-Medical Dispensatory: A Treatise on Therapeutics, Materia Medica, and Pharmacy, in Accordance with the Principles of Physiological Medication. (Wm. H. Cook, 1869).

enslaved population, along with the perceived gullibility of enslaved men and women marked these horse thieves as threatening to their “way of life.”

During the summer of 1835, white citizens throughout the region reached a breaking point and began to push for the removal of this outlaw element from their communities. While the legacy of the frontier often celebrates individualism and self-preservation, townspeople were not forced to confront this threat alone. To the contrary, entire communities came together in order to engage in this process of eradication, often with the backing of judicial and enforcement organizations created solely to respond to these specific concerns. Vicksburg, having been overrun with an assortment of men who they labeled as gamblers, quickly became the central point from which this process of eradication spread.

In early July of 1835, the white citizens of Vicksburg responded to the threat of this outsider presence by forming an anti-gamblers committee. Gamblers had been operating a gambling house in the town for a period of time, and it appears that locals often frequented the establishment. In fact, accounts from the period suggest that the people of Vicksburg did not initially object to the presence of this gambling establishment. However, members of the community quickly began to distrust the gambling house and those who ran it. According to one source, those running the gambling

house had “decoys deployed” into the local community in order to “lure young men into the lion’s den, where they were inevitably fleeced of all they possessed and frequently ill treated by the conductors.”⁷² The community objected to the process of being drawn into this gambling house and taken advantage of by these professional gamblers. Perhaps little risk of physical harm existed in these environs; however, local men clearly viewed these activities as an assault on their honor and on their economic well-being.⁷³

For those who created or served on this anti-gamblers committee, the term “gambler” had an expanded meaning. Certainly those engaged in the actual practice of gambling along the river in Vicksburg, in the area known locally as the “Kangaroo,” were among its primary targets. However, as one local newspaper from the time indicated, the people of Vicksburg applied this term more broadly to include “gamblers, murderers, and swindlers who bid defiance to the law and decent citizens.” The discussion goes on to include various other individuals such as “itinerant preachers, steam doctors, and clock peddlers” as well as transients not known within the local community.⁷⁴ Some might question why the people of Vicksburg viewed

⁷² “Lynch’s Law,” The Farmer’s Cabinet, 1835-07-31, vol. 33; Iss. 48, p. 2.

⁷³ For many historians, discussions of southern violence, in particular as relates to the issue of slavery, the concept of honor rests at the center of their discussion. See for example, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Honor and Violence in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and John Hope Franklin, The Militant South: 1800-1860 (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1956).

⁷⁴ “More News from Madison, Hinds, and Warren,” Liberator, August 8, 1835; 5, 32, p. 126. Reprinted from the Natchez Courier.

occupations such as itinerant preachers, steam doctors and clock peddlers with the same sense of distrust as those involved in the more violent activities. The local populace deemed each of these groups of men a threat not solely based upon their ascribed professions, but more directly due to their freedom of movement and ability to interact with the local enslaved population, absent the supervision or direction of local whites.⁷⁵ From their viewpoint, no singular act posed a greater risk to the maintenance of this slave society than the unfettered engagement with their enslaved population of an unknown group of men. They viewed their slaves as easily motivated to rebellion; and through expression of this belief, they subconsciously acknowledged the tensions and unrest inherent among the enslaved population. Planters tended to minimize the imagery of unrest among their enslaved population; however, the internalized fears associated with the dangers posed by a discontented enslaved people played an integral role in how local whites defined and responded to those not a part of the community.⁷⁶

⁷⁵There is much discussion about a system of trade and various other forms of interaction that often took place between slaves and whites in rural areas as well as concerns about informal interactions among blacks and whites in various urban settings. "Natchez-Under-the Hill," an area notorious for many of the same sorts of activities as the gambling areas of Vicksburg, demonstrates many of these characteristics. Edith Wyatt Moore provides a vivid description of "Natchez-Under-the-Hill" and its reputation, which extended beyond the state of Mississippi, as well as these sorts of interracial interactions in Natchez-Under-the-Hill (Natchez, MS: Southern Historical Productions, 1958).

⁷⁶ As a traveler and observer of slavery, Frederick Law Olmsted provides excellent examples of the ways in which southern planters attempted to present an image of slavery dominated by contented slaves. However, he also effectively demonstrates the presence of unrest and violence at the root of the system.

The people of Vicksburg, as well as others in various jurisdictions throughout the State, created an anti-gamblers committee, not in opposition to the established forms of local authority, but rather, in their opinion, to buttress a system of “justice” that they viewed as inadequately prepared to confront this communal threat. As mentioned previously, the people of Vicksburg and several other communities in Mississippi believed that an intricate network of gamblers and thieves, fully capable of challenging established legal and judicial authorities, lurked in their midst.⁷⁷ In consequence, in times of danger, real or imagined, the formation of such extralegal organizations became the accepted response. These committees obtained their power and authority, not from State or from locally elected officials, but from common consent of the local populace. The vast majority of the members of the anti-Gambling committee in Vicksburg, as well as in similarly constructed committees across the state, belonged to the planter class. It should come as little surprise that the townspeople selected men of wealth and prominence, those generally considered the community’s leaders,

See, Frederick Law Olmsted, Edited with an Introduction by Arthur Schlesinger, The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveler’s Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States (New York: Knopf Press, 1953).

⁷⁷ For discussions of the size and scale of this imagined threat see, for example, “Transactions in Mississippi.” Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835 or “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law, The American Whig Review (1850-1852); March 1851; 7,3. p. 213.

to serve as their representatives on this committee.⁷⁸ However, it should not be assumed that the committee itself, or the actions that they committed or others committed on their behalf, represented anything less than the full sanction and participation of the community at large. The formation of such an extralegal organization permitted the community to react to their conditions with a swiftness and brutality that was often restricted by the confines of traditional American systems of law and justice. However, an observation of the series of events surrounding these various committees dispels two common images of the violence often associated with extralegal justice. It is often assumed that violent incidents such as those taking place in Vicksburg were examples of unrestricted mob rule conducted by the “lower sorts” without the knowledge or consent of local elites. Conversely, others view such incidents as demonstrative of the ability of local elites to coordinate and execute acts of mob violence, often without the full comprehension of meaning or consequence by the broader community.⁷⁹ In

⁷⁸ Specific information as to the membership of the Vicksburg committee is unclear. But records from a similarly formed committee in Livingston, Mississippi demonstrate the wealth and prominence of the committee’s members. In Livingston, information is available as to land and slave ownership of 12 of its 13 members: D. W. Haley, 320 acres and 17 slaves; James Grafton, 400 acres and 26 slaves; John Simmons, 1100 acres and 42 slaves; William Wade, 1042 acres and 42 slaves; Sack P. Gee, 320 acres and 8 slaves; Israel Spencer, acreage unknown with 8 slaves; Thomas Hudnold, 2700 acres and 118 slaves; Charles Smith, 240 acres and 18 slaves; Robert Hodge, 560 acres and 9 slaves; H. D. Runnels, 844 acres and 33 slaves; Nelson L. Taylor, 160 acres and 20 slaves; and M. D. Mitchell

⁷⁹ For discussions as the use and functions of mob violence and lynch law see Christopher Waldrep, The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); Christopher Waldrep, Lynching in America: A History in Documents (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Eaton Clement, “Mob Violence in the Old South,” Mississippi Valley

Vicksburg, the line between elites and the masses became blurred as both groups clearly took on leadership roles at various points, and the entire community remained actively engaged in what they viewed as essential in the preservation of the community. Distinctions in class and power clearly existed in antebellum Mississippi, but as seen through the events in Vicksburg and surrounding areas, when threatened, local citizens found ways to work collectively in their perceived best interest.

On July 4th, 1835, tensions between local whites and the gamblers of the Kangaroo escalated to a point of action. Whereas previous periods had witnessed discussions by the local populace as to the threat posed by these gamblers, on this Independence Day, the people of Vicksburg organized a new committee charged with the responsibility of clearing out the Kangaroo and removing these men from the area. A variety of scenarios survived in regards to what action or series of actions led to this final breach. However, what is clear is that as the local citizenry reached this tipping point, a sense of moral outrage motivated the community to act “in consideration of the alarming state of the neighborhood” in and around Vicksburg, quickly issuing “an ordinance that all gamblers and other suspicious person’s of ill-

Historical Review, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Dec., 1942), pp. 351-370; David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828 – 1865: Toward Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Michael Pheifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

fame should forthwith, quit the precincts of the town, or Slick's Law should be administered to whomsoever refused."⁸⁰ The people of Vicksburg made their position clear: gamblers had the option of leaving the area or suffering the consequences associated with decision to remain.

According to one local report on the events that precipitated the creation of this committee and the call for the clearing out of the Kangaroo, the final incident involved a confrontation at a Fourth of July community dinner. A large portion of the town's residents, along with prominent dignitaries and state public officials such as S. S. Prentiss and John Quitman, came together in celebration of the national holiday.⁸¹ During the course of this holiday meal, a "gambler" attempted to take a seat at the public dinner table, where he was confronted by a local citizen who refused to permit his attendance at the event. Clearly angered by the actions of this citizen, the gambler initially left the celebration; then "arm[ing] himself with a brace of pistols, [he] came back declaring his determination to shoot the man who had offended him."⁸² The local people fully perceived this man as willing

⁸⁰ MDAH "Transactions in Mississippi," Niles' Register Oct. 17th, 1835. Slick's Law, referred to in other sources from the period as Judge Lynch's Law or simply Lynch's Law, entailed the use of violence, generally by a large number of people, with the objective of causing the victim to willingly leave the area, often under threat of further violence or death.

⁸¹ For discussions of the political life of S. S. Prentiss, see George Lewis Prentiss, A Memoir of S. S. Prentiss (New York: C. Scribner, 1855). In reference to John Quitman see J. F. H Claiborne, Life and Correspondences of John A. Quitman, Major General, U. S. A., and Governor of the State of Mississippi (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860) and Robert E. May, John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

⁸² MDAH "Gamblers in the West," Niles' Register, August 8th, 1835, p. 401.

and capable of following through on his murderous threat; and, consequently repelled his attempts to return to cause any further mischief.⁸³ The report continues by suggesting that as a direct response to his threats, an action that served as the culmination of ever increasing tensions between the two groups, the townspeople of Vicksburg pledged to establish an anti-gambling committee.⁸⁴

A second account paints a similar portrait as to the final tipping point that led to the formation of this committee and the expression of the community's desire for the removal of this group of men. According to this description, a group of rambunctious gamblers interrupted a parade and barbecue, also being held in celebration of Independence Day. Though this incident had slightly different details in terms of the cause of the confrontation, the townspeople responded similarly and again determined to

⁸³ Numerous scholars have emphasized the role and importance of honor in the formation of southern society and how it relates to the prominence of violence within this culture. Such questions of honor appear to be at play in terms of the series of events mentioned in the above scenario. However, it is unclear how concepts of honor were translated into actions when applied to those viewed as outsiders or the "other." The gambler returned with his guns, according to the aforementioned remembrance, in response to an act that he clearly viewed as disrespectful. However, rather than defend his unjustifiably assaulted honor (as there appears to be no mention of him having acted inappropriately in this incident, other than in terms of his identification as a gambler), the townspeople view this event as a justifiable spark for the ensuing wave of violence. For discussions of honor and violence in the American South see John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South: 1800-1860* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1956) and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁸⁴ MDAH "Gamblers in the West," *Niles' Register*, August 8th, 1835, p. 401.

drive this group of men from the community and organized in order to achieve that objective.⁸⁵

In viewing these various remembrances of the causes leading up to the formation of this committee and the commitment of the community to the removal of the outlaw presence, it is important to recognize the ways in which each scenario seemed to emphasize the defensive role of the community in response to offensive actions taken on the part of the gamblers. Under each scenario, the people of Vicksburg remain the aggrieved party. Each of these variations placed the burden of the creation of the committee on the actions of the gamblers. These men posed either a moral or physical threat to the “good” people of Vicksburg, and thus had to be dealt with quickly and forcefully. The community’s actions, however, also speak to their sense of a collective identity. The individual gambler approaching the public dinner had to be viewed not as a singular threat, but as exemplary of a larger whole. Likewise, the Vicksburg citizen who denied him access to this event quickly became symbolic of the larger local community, thus deserving the support and defense of all contained therein. Definitions of self and “other,” community and outsider, citizen and gambler, cemented over the years leading up to this point, proved critical in

⁸⁵ MDAH “The Martyrs of Mississippi,” in Allan Cabiniss, Religion in the Making (1942).

the path taken by the people of Vicksburg in response to the perceived threat erupting on this holiday in 1835.⁸⁶

Thus united, on the afternoon of July 4th, the people of Vicksburg formed the anti-gambling society alongside a military company that possessed the authority to enforce any edicts proclaimed by the committee. The first action taken by the committee was to post notices throughout the town, which stated the position of the townspeople. These notices allowed the gamblers no more than forty eight hours to clear out of the Kangaroo, lest they suffer the consequences of a forceful removal.⁸⁷ One summary of the notices suggested that, “in consideration of the alarming state of the neighborhood as and about Vicksburg, its citizens issued an ordinance that all gamblers and other suspicious persons of ill-fame should forthwith quit the precincts of the town, or Slick’s Law shall be administered to whomsoever refused.”⁸⁸ These were no idle threats on the part of the townspeople. They had every intention of ensuring the removal of the aggrieving party from their midst, as one citizen stated, “peaceably if

⁸⁶ The people of Vicksburg went to great lengths to justify their actions towards these outsiders. This is an issue that will be developed more fully in the subsequent discussion.

⁸⁷ MDAH “The Martyrs of Mississippi,” in Allan Cabiniss’ *Religion in the Making* (1942). Other sources suggest that they were given 24 hours to evacuate the area as opposed to two days. See MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835 or MDAH “More news from Madison, Hinds, and Warren,” *Liberator*; August 8, 1835; 5, 32, p. 126.

⁸⁸ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835.

possible, forcibly if necessary.”⁸⁹ Some accounts suggest that the townspeople of Vicksburg acquired access to a steamboat, notified the gamblers of their willingness to pay for their passage, before concluding with the assertion to “quit they must!”⁹⁰ A peaceful resolution to this situation remained unlikely, however. A number of those inhabiting the Kangaroo quickly established the fact that they had no intention of leaving on their own accord. Consequentially, a number of local citizens expressed their intentions by stressing that they remained “determined to enforce the ordinance, and [that] after arresting [the gamblers]” they intended “to whip them from the town.”⁹¹ The lines between the two parties clearly established, and their intentions clearly stated; the situation in Vicksburg quickly turned violent.

Five men openly refused to evacuate the Kangaroo: Mr. North, Dutch Bill, Samuel Smith, Mr. McCall, and Mr. Callum.⁹² Rather than leave the area, these men determined to remain holed up in the home of Mr. North, and expressed a willingness to defend themselves and their property in the face of the community’s threats. These men understood the gravity of the situation, and consequently “vetoed the ordinance, and betook themselves to

⁸⁹ MDAH “The Martyrs of Mississippi” in Allan Cabiniss’ Religion in the Making (1942).

⁹⁰ “Lynch’s Law” The Farmers’ Cabinet, 1835-07-31; Vol. 33; Iss. 48; p. 2.

⁹¹ “More News From Madison, Hinds, and Warren” Liberator; August 8, 1835; 5, 32, p. 126.

⁹² “Lynch’s Law” The Farmers’ Cabinet; 1835-07-31; Vol.: 33; Iss. 48; p. 2.

a house which they barricaded; and armed with pistols and knives, prepared to defend themselves against any force which might be attempted by the citizens, which they anticipated by their preparations.”⁹³ The anti-gambling committee responded quickly, sending the military company organized alongside the committee to enforce the position of the townspeople. Under the direction of Dr. H. Bodley, a group of armed men arrived at the home of Mr. North the following morning. Upon their arrival, they presented the five men with a final ultimatum issued by the anti-gambling society, with the backing and authority of the entire community, which demanded “an unconditional surrender of the criminals.”⁹⁴ They presented the five men barricaded inside the house with the option of submitting themselves to the authority of this armed group or rejecting their demands and following through with their decision to forcefully defend themselves. The gamblers chose the latter course.

Dr. Bodley attempted to gain access to the house, and was met with strong resistance on the part of those inside. The events that followed ultimately served as the justification for a further escalation of violence on the part of the people of Vicksburg. As Dr. Bodley and his comrades attempted to forcefully open the front door in an effort to seize the men,

⁹³ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

⁹⁴ “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law” The American Whig Review, March 1851; 7, 3. p. 213.

those inside the house responded with a volley of gunfire. In the course of these events, a number of shots struck Dr. Bodley, killing him instantly.⁹⁵

Public descriptions of Dr. Bodley portrayed him as “a most valuable and highly respected citizen, who lived in the hearts of the community.”⁹⁶

The loss of such a valued and respected member of the community enraged the other members of the party, who responded by returning fire, wounding one of the men inside the home, and subsequently gaining access to the home and capturing those inside. Upon detaining these men, the mood remained quite sour. They made no attempt to remove the gamblers from the community, but instead quickly took “them to a convenient place of execution, without delay, [and] hanged the five.”⁹⁷ Another source described the events similarly, stressing how, after gaining access to the home and detaining the gamblers, the enraged men made no attempts to present them before the assembled committee for sentencing, but rather “dragged them to the public square and HANGED THEM INSTANTER!”⁹⁸

After hanging the five men, their assailants posted a notice warning that

⁹⁵ “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law” *The American Whig Review*, March 1851; 7, 3, pg. 213. “Lynch’s Law,” *The Farmer’s Cabinet*, 1835-07-31, vol. 33; issue 48: p. 2. MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835. While it is generally accepted that Dr. Bodley died during the attempt to seize the gamblers in this home, “Lynch’s Law” provides an alternative scenario, suggesting the possibility that Dr. Bodley may have been killed, not in the assault on the home of Mr. North, but in the local gaming house after losing a large sum of money.

⁹⁶ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Lynch’s Law,” *The Farmer’s Cabinet*, 1835-07-31, vol. 33; issue 48: p. 2.

anyone who approached their bodies within the next twenty-four hours would be “served likewise.”⁹⁹ After allowing the bodies to hang for the allotted twenty-four hour period, the townspeople disposed of their bodies unceremoniously, with one body being rumored as having been “bound, placed in an open boat, and set afloat on the Mississippi.”¹⁰⁰

To suggest that the response of the citizens was purely the consequence of uncontrolled anger and emotion would appear not to acknowledge the clear presence of other important motivating factors demonstrated in the manner in which they dealt with the gamblers, both while alive and following their deaths. In actuality, their actions appear to be far more calculated than emotionally driven. The public nature of the killings, as well as the public display of their bodies (followed by direct threats to those who might choose to intervene subsequent to their demise) suggests that the killings served a role directed as much towards others in the area who might consider disregarding the will of the local populace as to these five gamblers themselves.¹⁰¹ The people of Vicksburg used the killing of these gamblers and the brutal disposal of their bodies afterwards to clearly define what would and would not be accepted within their community and to

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ MDAH “The Martyrs of Mississippi” in Allan Cabiniss’ *Religion in the Making* (1942).

¹⁰¹ For discussions on the symbolic role of the body and death, see for example, Saidiya, V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

limit the willingness of outsiders to challenge these parameters. These actions moved beyond the realm of punishment to acts of announcement or avowal in regards to the will of the people. As the bodies hung in the town center, they became representative of the manner in which the townspeople would deal with others deemed to be threatening to their society and expressed an understanding that these actions represented meanings which extended far beyond the five men whose lives had been taken. Members of the community defined their boundaries, and those within the community professed their willingness to defend those boundaries as they stood.

The killing of these five gamblers did not bring an end to the pursuits of the townspeople. Among the citizenry of Vicksburg, the “lynching spirit ran high,” and consequently, after the unceremonious disposal of the gamblers’ bodies, those charged with enforcing the proclamations of the committee immediately set out after another group of men who they believed to be regrouping at the local racing grounds. As they pursued these men, the party had every intention of hanging them in much the same manner as those previously captured. However, upon arriving at the race grounds, the response varied greatly from the previous situation. Perhaps most significant in establishing the course of action taken by the townspeople was the limited amount of resistance on the part of those at the

race ground. Unlike the five men who barricaded themselves in Mr. North's home, those at the race ground chose not to engage in a firefight with the approaching party.

Coming on the heels of the previous day's executions and the public display of those captured at Mr. North's home, it is conceivable that those gathering at the race ground understood the futility of physical resistance and opted for a more reasoned, less contentious response. Clearly they held no doubts as to the lengths to which the townspeople were willing to go in order to ensure their removal from the community, and no illusions as to the severity of consequences were they to openly resist in the same manner. Such a response on the part of these gamblers would suggest the effectiveness of the actions taken on the part of the townspeople in regards to those captured previously. The community's actions, as suggested above, not only removed those who dared to challenge the will and authority of the local populace from their community, but also served clear and effective notice to others that such challenges would meet with a harsh response. Faced with the options laid before them, the gamblers assembled at the race ground chose to submit to the authority of the committee and its representatives in hopes of avoiding a sentence of death.

The response upon arriving at the race ground differed greatly from the previous day's activities; however, to suggest that they demonstrated any sort of leniency would be an overstatement. The townspeople spared the lives of the men waiting at the race ground, but only "on the condition of their quitting the country forever."¹⁰² Agreeing to leave the community constituted an acceptance as to the authority and power of the local populace. It also acknowledged their place as outsiders in regards to that community. The party did not simply allow the gamblers to depart with a warning, but rather took pains to further exert their power and control over these men prior to their release. Not until after being "Slicked" by the party did the gamblers depart the area. The townspeople took time to inflict further pain and insult upon these gamblers as a final statement as to the genuineness of their position. At this point, feeling that they had sufficiently delivered their message, and successfully clearing out the gambling element from the Kangaroo, the people of Vicksburg allowed the gamblers to flee the area. As one report described the series of events, the gamblers happily departed, and when given the chance, "the gang were glad enough to have liberty to take leg bail."¹⁰³

¹⁰² MDAH "Transactions in Mississippi," Niles' Register, October 17, 1835.

¹⁰³ MDAH "Gamblers in the West" Niles' Register, August 8, 1835, p. 403.

Though rogue violence, or extra-legal violence, is often imagined as an explosion of lawlessness emanating from an uncontrollable mob of the “lower sorts,” the actions taking place in this situation in many ways dispel this myth. It is unclear precisely how the people of Vicksburg went about selecting members and leaders within this anti-gambling society. However, it is clear that some of the area’s more prominent and influential residents occupied positions of leadership and power and that these men coordinated and involved themselves intimately in these actions of violence. Any suggestion that a separation existed between the actions taken by those who hung the gamblers and the elite members of the community is simply inaccurate. Dr. Bodley, described by many as the inspiration for the bloodletting in Vicksburg, demonstrates the central position held by prominent members of the community within the committee. Not only is he viewed as one of the leaders, but his presence remained prominent as the series of actions began to take shape. In fact, one source suggests that Dr. Bodley not only led the attack on the gamblers but also served as the chairman of the anti-gambling committee.¹⁰⁴ Writers continuously praised his character and value in descriptions of his death; portraying him in such

¹⁰⁴ “Lynch’s Law,” The Farmer’s Cabinet, 1835-07-31, vol. 33; issue 48: p. 2.

complimentary manners as “a gentleman of great worth”¹⁰⁵ and “a most valuable and highly respectable citizen.”¹⁰⁶

As this demonstrates, the apparent “lawlessness” in these actions occurred in concert with the consent and participation of the region’s socially and economically elite rather than in opposition to them. In an article from the *Liberator* the author supports such a connection although he laments not only the brutality of the actions in Vicksburg, but also the celebratory nature of the killings and descriptions of those involved. He bemoans that as the violent killings took place, “Yankee Doodle was played to drown out the cries of the murdered,” and how another “distinguished gentleman,” named Captain Barumgard, “and forty military volunteers in arms superintended the whole affair, and to sanctify the slaughter...” In addition, in an act clearly directed more towards other gamblers than towards the victims themselves, “the five men were kept hanging in their normal dress, with faces uncovered in derision, during 24 hours; and their corpses were then thrown into a hole near the gallows.”¹⁰⁷ The entire community clearly sanctioned the violence perpetrated against these gamblers and excused any actions extending outside the normal purview of

¹⁰⁵This phrase appears in descriptions in “The Commotion in Mississippi,” *Liberator*, Boston: Aug. 15, 1835, vol. 5. Iss. 33; p. 132 as well as in “More News From Madison, Hinds, and Warren” *Liberator*; August 8, 1835; 5, 32, p. 126..

¹⁰⁶MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835.

¹⁰⁷“The Commotion in Mississippi,” *Liberator*, Boston: Aug. 15, 1835, vol. 5. Iss. 33; p. 132.

the law. Protection of the community and its people from threats, real or imagined, justified any apparent excesses.

External viewers, however, did not always provide complimentary or supportive analyses of their actions. Rather than celebrating the actions of the townspeople of Vicksburg, one observer decried his “utter repugnance for those people of respectability at Vicksburg” and went on to proclaim that “the state of morals in Mississippi can easily be understood from the fact that a ruffian named Bodley, who headed the murderous gang, is called a ‘gentleman of great worth.’”¹⁰⁸ This description, and others like it, laments what it views as the excessive and unwarranted use violence. Though clearly situated in what many considered to be a frontier region, many outsiders took note of the fact that systems of law and justice were in place in Vicksburg, and became distraught by the fact that the citizens *chose* to work outside those systems and exact their own “justice” in its stead.

Perhaps aware of the impressions and opinions of others in terms of the actions taken in Vicksburg, community members went to great lengths to explain and justify their proceedings. In The American Whig Review, a writer in essence agrees with many of those critical of the actions taken by the townspeople of Vicksburg. He argues that the use of Lynch Law is

¹⁰⁸ “The Commotion in Mississippi,” Liberator. Boston: Aug. 15, 1835, vol. 5. Iss. 33; p. 132.

acceptable only where there is no or limited established civilization and an absence of community structures. Once these mechanism are put in place, he argues, to allow actions which extend beyond the reach of the law serves the purpose of “establish[ing] a precedent for riot and murder – to open the door for anarchy and incalculable mischief.”¹⁰⁹ However, moving from the abstract opinion described above, to the concrete conditions of Vicksburg, this writer contends that the use of Lynch Law was justifiable and even laudable, despite the presence of the conditions he discusses above. He views these actions as occurring within an environment, while containing the structures of civility and the mechanisms of law, being overrun by an immense presence of gamblers. Despite the talk of the dangers associated with allowing Lynch Law to permeate civilized society, this writer goes on to celebrate its usage, proclaiming “Five of them [gamblers] were seized and hung; and had the entire gang in the southwest met with the same fate in the same manner, their destruction would have been an incalculable blessing to the country.”¹¹⁰ In essence, protection of the community justifies any excesses that might occur. In this case, the violence is not only necessary or acceptable, but also desirable, as are the results of that violence.

¹⁰⁹ “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law,” The American Whig Review (1850 – 1852); March 1851; 7, 3. p. 213.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Others agreed that the sheer numbers of gamblers justified any apparent excesses in violence. Again, such positions stressed the vulnerability of the population and cast the people of Vicksburg into the role of “victim.” In their view, the community took actions in *defense* of their condition, rather than being in the position of the aggressors. Accounts sought to portray an image whereby the “country has been overrun by adventurers of all denominations, and that the efforts of justice to drag to punishment, by the civil process, the marauders that have infested this territory, have been denied and despised.”¹¹¹ The mechanisms of justice in existence were therefore viewed as inadequate in responding to such an immense threat. There was no denial that at various points some excessive violence did occur. However, the entire community should not be held to task for the excesses of some of its members, they argued. “Some excesses have been committed, and will in all communities, but it makes the virtuous part of the community not less justifiable on that account.” In fact, he continues, “It is only necessary to visit and come acquainted with the Mississippians, to be thoroughly of the opinion that they are as enterprising, intelligent, generous, magnanimous, and chivalric, as any within the limits

¹¹¹ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

of the United States.”¹¹² These men are not killers, but rather protectors of that which is good about Mississippi, and in turn, good about America. Viewed in this regard, their actions should not be criticized, but rather appreciated and honored.

Various external voices praised the actions taken towards these gamblers. In an open letter to the editor of a newspaper in Lexington, Kentucky the writer condemned the lack of action taken on the part of Mississippi Governor Hiram Runnels and argued on behalf of “Judge Lynch,” proclaiming that his (Judge Lynch’s) actions show him to be more worthy of being elected governor than Governor Runnels. He writes,

“...as I see by the Mississippi papers, that since he [Judge Lynch] has had all of the Gamblers hung or driven out of Mississippi, he had become a candidate for Governor of the state in opposition to Governor Runnels. I hope, Mr. Printers, that Judge Lynch will be elected, for I do not like that Governor Runnels. He waited until Judge Lynch had hung or run all the gamblers out of the State, and then issued a Proclamation, ordering them all to clear out under pain of his displeasure!”¹¹³

The editor of the Natchez Courier, taking great pride in the actions of his fellow Mississippians, responded by asserting that Judge Lynch was not available and that he would be continuing his work in Mississippi. He concluded his response by asserting that, “when Judge Lynch shall be

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Natchez Courier and Journal, Friday, September 11, 1835, p. 2.

elected Governor of Mississippi, which will be in November next, the laws will be so executed that the Judge can be well spared from the bench.”¹¹⁴

The editor clearly sees violence as a welcome and useful tool in the maintenance of order and control within Mississippi society. As expressed in his response, room remains for violence to play an even larger role in the preservation of Mississippi society.

In the final analysis, the descriptions of the various people went to great pains to portray an image of townspeople engaged in deliberate and calm actions, having only the designs of protecting the community at heart. The impulse of violence, which quickly showed itself, is described throughout these accounts as flashes in response to the despicable actions of the outlaws. Left to their own devices, the townspeople would have preferred to eradicate this gambling presence without the need or use of violence. Unfortunately, for defenders of these actions such a deliberative approach proved impossible, as they proclaimed that the actions of the desperadoes and the murder of their beloved leader “gave another current to their resolution, and terribly did they take their vengeance.”¹¹⁵ Victimized by the brutality of the offending marauders, the townspeople responded in

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” Niles’ Register, August 8, 1835, p. 403.

kind. Once again, they proclaimed, if excesses occurred at the hands of the townspeople, the fault remained at the feet of their victims.

Vicksburg received the greatest amount of notoriety in regards to its anti-gambling committee due to the surprising violence associated with its existence. However, it is important to note that other communities in the area created similar organizations, often in solidarity with the committee from Vicksburg during this time period. The presence of these gamblers and outlaws posed a regional concern, and communities throughout the region, especially in Adams and Hinds counties, organized in a manner similar to those in Vicksburg in order to expel their presence.

The details of the activities in Natchez are a bit less clear, however, evidence suggests that the people of this community actively pressed for the removal of these outlaws as well. Natchez-Under-the-Hill earned a reputation rivaling that of Vicksburg's Kangaroo district. Less than 2 weeks following the events in Vicksburg, a newspaper in New Orleans reported an eyewitness account, which suggests that similarities between Natchez and Vicksburg might very well be substantial. According to the report, a "Steamer Mogul reports that she saw at Natchez, as she passed down, several boats crowded with persons who had been ordered from that place, in consequence of their abandoned character, and also saw, at Ellis' Cliffs,

18 same description of persons, but principally females—all bound down the Mississippi. The people of Natchez had driven every suspicious person from a part of their town known as ‘Natchez under the hill.’”¹¹⁶ The specific details as to how the people of Natchez drove the “suspicious” people from their town is absent; their effectiveness in doing so, however, seems clear.¹¹⁷

On July 10th, the people of Natchez held a public meeting in order to create an anti-gambling committee, in part in support of the activities in Vicksburg. The people appointed Thomas McDannold chairman of the committee and selected Fleming Wood as secretary. The people of Vicksburg sent an address to Natchez, which they read as a part of the meeting. The people of Vicksburg sent the address in order to request “the assistance of the people of Natchez in the suppression of gambling, and their cooperation in the expulsion of professional gamblers from the country.”¹¹⁸ The meeting continued with Colonel James C. Wilkins introducing a number of resolutions “requesting the civil authorities to adopt the most rigorous measures for the extirpation of gambling – invoking the citizens to

¹¹⁶ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” Niles’ Register, August 8, 1835, p. 401. This appears to be the only mention of women being purged from these communities. This is not to suggest that women were not forced to flee Vicksburg as well, but simply that all specific references to gamblers refer to men.

¹¹⁷ Interestingly, four days after this mention of the steamboat carrying those forced to flee Natchez, another entry describes a second steamboat purported to have originated in Vicksburg. “By the steamboat Navarino, which arrived last evening, we learn that the citizens of Vicksburg were about to charter a steamboat to removed the gamblers, who had taken up their residence on Palmyra island – where they intended to convey them our informant did not ascertain.” Ibid.

¹¹⁸ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” Niles’ Register, August 8, 1835, p. 402.

discountenance it, and pledging the members of the meeting to use every legal expedient to crush its alarming and iniquitous practice.”¹¹⁹ The people of Natchez adopted the resolution unanimously, and Mr. Thomas Armat subsequently proposed,

“that the citizens of Natchez condole with the citizens of Vicksburg in the loss of their beloved fellow citizen, Dr. Bodley; and although they look with sorrow to the cause which rendered it necessary to proceed to measures so violent and severe, and to supersede the laws of the land, yet we assure them of our cooperation in all legal measures to obtain the objective proposed; and also that we will support with our services and lives such measures as the civil authorities of Natchez may direct for the suppression of gambling.”¹²⁰

This proclamation reinforced the belief that the gamblers caused the violence which occurred in Vicksburg, and that the “measures so violent and severe” resulted from the murder of Dr. Bodley. In addition, the statement expresses a shared belief that such extralegal actions as which took place in Vicksburg clearly fell within the parameters of “all legal measures to obtain the objective proposed.” In other words, the people of Vicksburg and Natchez possessed the ability to determine the definition as to what actions would or would not be deemed legal. If an outside threat presented itself, the violence necessary to repel that threat determined which actions became acceptable from the perspective of these communities. The final proclamation presented by the Natchez committee

¹¹⁹ Ibid. With the knowledge of the events having taken place in Vicksburg, the actions acceptable under their definition of “legal” expedience may have proved to be quite expansive.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

supports this concept as it professed that, “It is in vain if laws are enacted if they are not enforced by the moral sense of the community.” Further, “The proceedings of Vicksburg have kindled a spirit throughout the lower country which is breaking forth at every point, and obliging the blackleg fraternity to make their escape with all haste.”¹²¹

The people of Natchez described their committee as a “society for the suppression of swindling!” They claimed that the objective of this society was “to encourage honesty and thwart rascality. Praise to integrity, and exposure to villainy, will be the principle aim of the association, and it will use all legitimate means to obtaining its ends.”¹²² Put simply, the ends justified the means. Any actions deemed necessary to fulfill the interests of the community went unchallenged. The article continues by stressing that the committee will “publish the names and personal descriptions of detected swindlers; and of rewards for bringing them to justice.”¹²³ Stated in this manner, the committee exudes the image of a less menacing group than that found in Vicksburg. The manner in which other towns discussed the arrival of those forced to flee Natchez, however, suggests otherwise. The article concludes by reinforcing the notion that the committee has the full support of the community. These are not outlier groups

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² MDAH Natchez Courier and Journal (June 5, 1835 – January 1, 1836), Friday, July 3, 1835 Microfilm Roll # 21941.

¹²³ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” Niles’ Register, August 8, 1835, p. 402.

from within the community. The actions taking place at the bequest of the committee represent the interests and objectives of the larger communities out of which they emerged.

It appears that many of the gamblers who fled Vicksburg ended up in Clinton, Mississippi. They were not well received there, however, and on July 8th, the people of Clinton came together and posted the following notice, warning the gamblers not to remain in Clinton. “All gamblers found in Clinton after 12 o’clock, will be used according to Lynch Law. The importations from Vicksburg will look out.”¹²⁴ There is no mention as to what occurred in Clinton subsequently, but it is clear that the townspeople of this community shared in the concerns, as well as in the approach, of the people of Vicksburg and Natchez.

There is an important link between the roles that myth and history played in the formation of ideas and in defining individuals and groups of people. These definitions are crucial in establishing that which is worthy of defending and those who should be included or excluded from the protections and values of the community. The focus or emphasis on the creation of these legends is not intended to minimize the actuality of various threats to the community, but rather the role that these legends played in defining said community. The threats may very well be “real,” but the perception of these threats and of those connected with the

¹²⁴ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” Niles’ Register, August 8, 1835, p. 403.

threats, proves more significant in that it often helps shape the changing definitions as to who is included in discussions of “us” and “them” or community and “other.” These shifts, as seen in this chapter, play a determinative role in the actions taken by individuals and the community.

Although enslaved men and women play a mostly tangential role in the explosion of violence described in this chapter, the significance of these men and women, and of the system in which they were forced to labor, should not be minimized. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, a perceived threat, grounded in a challenge to the stability of the institution of slavery (and all that this system represented both socially and economically), produced an exponentially more severe response. Understanding the importance of violence within the institution of slavery becomes clearer through this understanding of the role that violence played within the larger community where it existed.

Incidents of violence towards gamblers and outlaws in Vicksburg rest at the center of this discussion. However, the core of my argument, as demonstrated here, contends that this violence, and its use as a method of control and organization, should not be viewed as extreme or exceptional. It fits clearly and directly into a tradition of violence shaped and created around the various designations of “us” and “other.” The entire community, from the largest plantation owners to the poorer members of the region, worked in concert with one

another, often displaying a sense of singular thought and action, in defense of their view of community.

As the belief arose that an assault against the very institution of slavery was imminent, it quickly became clear that not only would the various aspects of the community work together in the system's defense, as had been the case with the gamblers, but also that extralegal justice, the official legal justice, and military mechanisms of the state would work hand in hand in opposition to the challenge. The citizens of Vicksburg argued that violence, when used in situations such as those described here, should be viewed not as an irrational, anger-driven response, but as a deliberate and effective tool wielded for the preservation of community values and ideals; and no value or ideal deserved to be protected more forcefully than the institution of slavery.

CHAPTER 3

THE “OTHER” WITHIN: COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY AMONG MISSISSIPPI’S ENSLAVED PEOPLE

In late June and into July of 1835, the white people of Clinton, Livingston, Madison and surrounding areas in Mississippi responded to what they believed to be a severe threat to their communities. Their actions in many ways paralleled those taking place over the same period in Vicksburg in response to the presence of gamblers. Their responses were swift, ruthless, and demonstrated the collective efforts and interests of the people of the region. While much about the response of the townspeople in these areas resembled what transpired during the gambling incident, the threat itself took on a very different form.

Unlike in Vicksburg, where local citizens focused on a group of white men seen as outsiders, in Clinton and Livingston the menace threatening their community came in the form of men and women who existed at the very center of their slave society; enslaved men and women who slaveholders professed to know and understand as members of their own

families.¹²⁵ Whereas the citizens of Vicksburg turned their attention to a group of white men who demonstrated an unwillingness to acquiesce to the professed values and mores of the community, fear of unrest and violence at the hands of enslaved men and women drove the actions in this second series of events. Despite assertions by whites that slaves accepted their condition of bondage, this group of enslaved people, as was the case with the gamblers of Vicksburg, clearly exhibited an unwillingness to accept white slaveholders and townspeople's attempts to shape or control their behavior. Tensions remained constant between the enslaved people and their captors in the years and decades leading up to the incidents of 1835. Indeed, the actions taken by Clinton and Livingston whites suggest that their interactions and experiences with the enslaved community, rather than assuaging apprehensions of a perceived threat, provided an intensified comprehension of the dangers associated with the so-called servile population. This recognition on the part of whites ultimately added to their rapid, brutal, and collective response to a perceived insurrection.

This combination of similarities and differences offers a significant comparative analysis between the gambling threat to Vicksburg and the suspected insurrectionary plot. Such an analysis informs our understanding

¹²⁵ For example, see the writings of S. S. Prentiss who would later serve as Governor of Mississippi regarding the nature of his slaves. George Lewis Prentiss, A Memoir of S. S. Prentiss: edited by his Brother (New York, 1856), p. 70. Letter from S. S. Prentiss to his mother dated February 12, 1828.

of the development and evolution of antebellum Mississippi society in the Jacksonian era. This examination takes us beyond the economic arguments suggested by scholars such as Joshua Rothman and the frontier analysis maintained by scholars such as Christopher Morris, Laurence Shore, and David J. Libby.¹²⁶ Without denying the importance of such arguments, these two incidents, viewed side by side provide another lens. Viewing them in isolation skews their interpretive meanings in terms of a fuller illumination about the workings of Mississippi society, slavery, and its people. Moreover, simply merging the two into a single event that portrays one as a consequence of the other also distorts the meaning of the perceived threats and the respective responses. The response of white residents in both events demonstrates the centrality of coercive force and violence in the maintenance of “order” in antebellum Mississippi society. Perhaps slavery exacerbated the levels of violence. However, rather than serving as the cause of violence in the community, the institution of slavery and efforts to maintain that system, more accurately represented an extension of the

¹²⁶ Joshua Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: The Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson*. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), Christopher Morris, “An Event in Community Organizations: The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835,” *Journal of Social History*, Volume 22, No. 1 (Autumn 1988), p. 93-111; Laurence Shore, “Making Mississippi Safe For Slavery: The Insurrectionary Panic of 1835,” in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, eds. *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport, CT, 1982), pp. 96-98. See also David J. Libby, *Slavery and Frontier Mississippi, 1720-1835*. (Jackson, University of Mississippi Press), p. xii.

broader community, wherein violence remained the normative expression of power, control, and fear. Such are the mechanisms of a frontier culture, society, and people. While slavery at its core was clearly a brutal and violent institution, these manifestations were also at the core of the broader Mississippi society as a whole. Brutality and violence did not simply bleed outwards from slavery into the broader Mississippi community, but instead flowed easily in both directions, each supporting the other. When challenged, the citizenry in an instinctive manner lashed out in an effort to restore order. It is this reaction that we so clearly see in the incidents of 1835.¹²⁷

Whether an immediate and substantial insurrectionary plot existed among the enslaved population in the area around Clinton, Mississippi during the summer of 1835 is debatable. The townspeople wrote of a slave conspiracy that “embraced the whole slave region from Maryland to Louisiana, and contemplated the total destruction of the white population of all the Slave states, and the absolute destruction of the whole country.”¹²⁸ Hence, far from being a localized threat, the townspeople feared an immense conspiracy designed to overthrow the entire slavocracy of the South. Yet,

¹²⁷ W. Eugene Hollon makes a similar contention regarding the flow of violence along the frontier, stating that, “frontier lawlessness was primarily the result, rather than the cause, of our violent society. W. Eugene Hollon, *Frontier Violence: Another Look* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. ix.

¹²⁸ “The Horrible Conspiracy” *Clinton (Miss) Gazette*, July 11, 1835.

through the process of investigation and the torture of certain slaves and selective whites, the white citizenry failed to discover any caches of arms or ammunition as well as any other direct evidence in support of such an immense assault. What is clear however, and in many senses more important than what was evidentiary or not, is that local citizens sincerely *believed* such a threat to be imminent and reacted accordingly. Additionally, white understandings of the violent slave society that they created and maintained, along with their understanding of the constant and varied forms of pushback against these conditions by black men and women, make such fears of insurrection far more rational than is often assumed.

Historians often apply the term “hysteria” in describing events such as those taking place in Mississippi throughout the summer of 1835.¹²⁹ Such a description suggests not only the absence of purpose, guidance, or direction, but also any sense that white Mississippians grounded the justifications for these actions in the realities of their experiences and conditions. Mass hysteria is defined as “a socially contagious frenzy or irrational behavior in a group of people as a reaction to an event.”¹³⁰ However, as Carl Jung emphasized in describing what we often view as delusions or fixed ideas,

¹²⁹ Libby, *Slavery in Frontier Mississippi: 1720-1835*. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), p. xiii.

¹³⁰ “Mass hysteria.” Def. 2. *The American Heritage Stedman’s Medical Dictionary*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2014).

“unresolved, long-lasting, painful events” often explain *why* individuals or groups of people hold their beliefs as well as the ways in which they ultimately choose to respond.¹³¹ When taking into consideration the lessons of one’s experiences or the shared experiences of a broader community, incidents often described as “mass hysteria,” while still unjust and extreme, suddenly seem less irrational. In the context of antebellum Mississippi’s slave society, the actions of whites during the summer of 1835 amounted to “rational hysteria”: immense fears and suspicions along with an unhesitating and violent response, grounded fully in their experiences and interactions with an immense, discontented slave community. In terms of the suspicions and actions taken by white Mississippians regarding the suspected insurrectionary plot of 1835 much can be explained by understanding the experiences of African Americans within this slave society and how the actions of slaves and their interactions among themselves and with whites helped create an expectation of unrest and a belief in the need for an extreme and unrelenting response.

As shown above, much of what we witnessed in terms of the response of local whites was grounded in the character (or caricature) of John Murrell and the outsider threat that he came to represent. Similarly, the reactions of

¹³¹ Hilary Evans and Robert Bartholomew, OUTBREAK: The Encyclopedia of Extraordinary Social Behaviour. (Charlottesville, VA: Anomalist Books, 2009).

whites to the suspected slave conspiracy can be best examined through the lens of the enslaved perspective. The life of Israel Campbell as laid out in his autobiography provides access to an examination of the life of a Mississippi slave as well as the suspicions and interactions between slaves and whites. It is certainly true that no singular slave experience can fully represent the broad complexities of the experiences of thousands of enslaved men and women throughout antebellum Mississippi, and in many senses Israel Campbell's experiences appear to be more exceptional or unique than representative. He was, for example, at the time of the suspected insurrectionary plot an enslaved overseer; a position held by very few African Americans during slavery. However, it is Israel Campbell's lived experiences leading up to his selection to serve as the plantation's overseer that provide insight into his views of himself, his fellow slaves, white Mississippians, and the system of slavery. Such insight provides answers in terms of understanding not only how enslaved men and women viewed their condition as slaves, but also why white Mississippians viewed their enslaved property as a menacing internal threat. Campbell serves as a witness not only to the experiences of Mississippi slavery more broadly but also directly to the events taking place as fears of an uprising spread throughout the region in the summer of 1835. Through Israel Campbell we begin to gain an

understanding of the complexities of antebellum Mississippi's slave society and the real threats that enslaved men and women posed to the physical and economic security of Mississippi whites. This "real" threat, regardless of whether or not slaves were actively engaged in a conspiracy at the time, had real consequences; consequences that rapidly became more brutal and more extreme as fear fed upon fear throughout the summer of 1835.

Campbell's narrative speaks directly to the arguments of many defenders of the institution of slavery during the antebellum period, as well as those presented by scholars in the decades following the institution's demise who suggest that a sense of affinity existed between slave masters and the men and women who labored under the system.¹³² Throughout his narrative, Campbell demonstrates not only an understanding of the brutalities that whites throughout the slave system constantly inflicted upon him and his fellow slaves, but also the clear disdain he and others held towards those who most openly abused their powers and authority. Campbell provides a compelling demonstration of these emotions in his discussions regarding the wife of his first owner.

¹³² John C. Calhoun of South Carolina most effectively presents the defense of slavery as a "positive good". See John C. Calhoun, "Slavery a Positive Good," Speech to the United States Senate, 1837. See also Eugene Genovese, The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); and Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

Campbell makes a conscious effort not to suggest that a singular description would apply to all whites, even those involved with slavery. He describes his first master, Captain John Russell, for instance, as “a leading light in the Presbyterian church” who generally refrained from beating his slaves.¹³³ Significantly, while only a child at the time, Campbell makes a noteworthy distinction between his perceptions of Captain Russell and those of Russell’s wife. In juxtaposition to his pious descriptions of Captain Russell, Campbell describes Russell’s wife thusly:

“She would swear, rant, and beat the slaves if they were brutes, and could never be pleased by any one...From morning until night could her voice be heard swearing, bawling and screaming at some of the hands; and with whip in hand, she would traverse the field, and if she thought any of the hands were not working as hard as they should, would pounce suddenly upon them, and appease her wrath by applying the lash.”¹³⁴

The imagery of his mistress prowling about the plantation, brutalizing all with whom she found displeasure is perhaps a familiar imagery associated with the institution of slavery. In a more widely read narrative of slavery, for example, Frederick Douglass provides a similar description of his first master who he remembers as a “cruel man, hardened by a long life of slave-holding...(who) would at times take great pleasure in whipping a

¹³³ Israel Campbell, *An Autobiography: Bond and Free: or Yearnings for Freedom, from my Greenbrier House. Being the Story of My Life in Bondage, and My life in Freedom* (Philadelphia, C.E.P. Brinckloe & Co., 1861). Electronic Edition. Property of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, p. 7. As Israel Campbell later became a preacher himself, such a description of Russell should be viewed as a truly complimentary statement.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 8

slave.”¹³⁵ What is more telling however, is Campbell’s expression of the ways in which Mrs. Russell’s actions shaped clear attitudes about her in his young mind and the minds of his fellow slaves. Campbell, and the other enslaved men and women on the plantation did not simply live as victims of the brutalities of their mistress or of the broader slave system, but rather formulated judgments about their enslavers that oftentimes led to concrete actions. The way in which Campbell and his fellow slaves viewed their mistress is expressed perhaps most clearly in his description of the period following her death. Campbell expresses nothing short of joy throughout the slave community with news of her passing as he recalls:

“The rejoicing that then occurred was such as is seldom indulged in among slaves. The thought of being freed from her tyranny seemed to thrill every heart, and although they did not really understand the full meaning of death, the idea of being free from her lash and eye seemed to possess every one, and while her spirit was passing to the undiscovered country, they were dancing and rejoicing over the result. The only good they really wished her was that God would have mercy on her and pardon her great wickedness.”¹³⁶

It should, however, remain clear, that the expression of such sentiments regarding their enslavers, if discovered, would not go unchecked. Later in life, for example, Campbell describes his conditions upon being hired out for the year along with a male slave named Barry and a female

¹³⁵ Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. (Wortley, near Leeds: published by J. Barker, 1846), p.15.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 9

slave named Lucinda to a neighboring planter, John Jones. According to Campbell, Jones owned another slave, Joe, whom he treated better than his hired slaves. The interactions among these slaves demonstrate the complexities, and oftentimes, tensions that were present within the slave communities. A process of “othering” took place, as Campbell and the other hired slaves came to view Joe as an extension of the master as opposed to a confederate. Though they shared a condition of slavery, the hired slaves did not believe that they could trust Joe. Campbell adds an additional layer of complexity to his views when he describes the situation thusly, stating, “We being yellow and he be[i]ng coal black, we thought it hard that he should be treated so much better than we, and complained among ourselves about it.”¹³⁷

They not only expressed their dissatisfaction with Joe, but also made disparaging comments about their renter’s wife among themselves as well. Barry, one of Campbell’s fellow slaves, commented that, “Mrs. Jones had better mind, for he would as soon slap her over as not.” Joe reported these comments to the Joneses. Subsequently, Mr. Jones approached Barry, tied his hands, “and took him into the yard and whipped him—giving him a

¹³⁷ Campbell, p. 41.

hundred lashes.”¹³⁸ Campbell’s distrust of Joe and his disdain for the Joneses both proved warranted.

Campbell recalls an even more severe response occurring on a neighboring plantation owned by Mr. Lipscomb where, according to Campbell, a slave named Jupiter described his mistress as a “red-headed devil” to his slave companions.¹³⁹ As was the case on the Jones plantation, a fellow slave informed Lipscomb’s wife of the insult and she subsequently told her husband. The series of events that followed speaks to the risks inherent in openly expressing the true feelings of disdain many slaves held towards their enslavers. Once informed of the comments, Lipscomb tied Jupiter

“down to three stakes and gave him two hundred lashes on his bare back. After this, Jupiter ran away; but they caught him after few days, when he was tied down and given two hundred lashes more. His master then put his tied hands behind his neck and passed a stick through them. He then tied another stick so it should be above his head, and to this he fastened a bell.”¹⁴⁰

The savagery did not end there, however. The following day, Jupiter returned to the fields, but was unable to pick his allotted task of cotton due to the severity of the previous two beatings. Lipscomb further chastised

¹³⁸ Ibid

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 67

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

Jupiter, issuing an additional two hundred lashes for his failure in the field. The following morning, Jupiter was dead.¹⁴¹ The brutality of Lipscomb's actions speaks directly to the savagery of the slave system. The broader series of events, however, demonstrates the interaction between the actions and attitudes of enslavers and the enslaved. Each constantly observed the other, forming ideas in the process and, in a variety of ways, acted upon them.

Enslaved men and women understood that open expressions of displeasure with their enslavers or with their condition as slaves often came with consequences, and as such many slaves chose to hide their displeasure from their enslavers. This sense of duplicity on the part of slaves served as a survival mechanism for some, allowing them to maintain their feelings towards their enslavers without suffering the consequences associated with openly expressing them. In many cases, slaveholders described these attitudes as though they were the true nature of their slaves. In describing the enslaved population, for example, John A. Quitman, who later served as Governor of Mississippi, expressed how, in his view, the childlike nature of the enslaved population tied into his perceptions of order and control. Quitman understood that enslaved men and women posed a threat, stating

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 68

that, “The stoutest and most sensible and trustworthy of them must be watched like children.” He then goes on to argue that “Harshness makes the negro stubborn; praise, and even flattery, and more than all, kindness makes them pliable and obedient. Keep them cheerful. I love to hear a gang of hands singing at their work, whistling on their way home, and fiddling and dancing at night. This manifests a contented heart.”¹⁴² Quitman focused on what he perceives to be an enslaved population happily going about its business. The slaves’ attitudes, resting under the surface, remain invisible in his analysis.

Despite such expressions by Quitman and others, few slaveholders deluded themselves as to the potential consequences associated with the excessive abuses inherent within the system of slavery. Whether viewed as slave resistance or simply the expression of one’s humanity, slaveholders understood the fact that, while their authority over their slaves remained limitless in the eyes of the law, the enslaved population constantly attempted to exert its own set of limits on the actions of their masters. Such resistance took a variety of forms. However, in viewing the emerging tensions and responses throughout the summer of 1835, two forms of resistance on the part of slaves appear most instructive: violent resistance and running away.

¹⁴² J. F. H. Claiborne, Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860), p. 190.

The fears associated with the economic losses caused by runaway slaves and the possibility of loss of life resulting from slave violence formed the foundations of white responses to perceived threats in antebellum Mississippi. These were not abstract fears, but rather fears directly related to the day-to-day experiences of the region. Again, by returning the focus more directly to the experiences of Israel Campbell, one is able to see the struggle for control taking place between slaveholders and their slaves in antebellum Mississippi.

Though Campbell's master ultimately appoints him overseer, actions in the earlier parts of his life demonstrate the tensions inherent within the slave system. While still a young boy, Israel Campbell recalls the first incident causing him to run away. Campbell did not intend to escape slavery, but simply to abscond from what he viewed to be an imminent, unjustified beating. As a boy, Campbell's responsibility was to "nurse a little child and to wait on mistress." He describes his mistress as excessively abusive and states that, "One night, being very tired, I determined if she whipped me I would run away."¹⁴³ The following day, Campbell followed through on his pledge, fleeing to a neighboring plantation where he remained over night and through the following morning.

¹⁴³ Campbell, Bond and Free. p. 20.

At that point, Campbell's master and his brother-in-law recaptured him, returned him to the plantation, and whipped him for his actions.

Interestingly, his retelling of this incident deals not only with his willingness to flee and the consequences of these actions, but also the false confessions that often arose during such violence. In a scenario that perhaps foreshadowed similar false confessions as the terror of the summer of 1835 spread throughout the slave community, Campbell mentions that his master, while whipping him, demanded to know if his Aunt Fanny convinced him to run. According to Campbell, he replied,

“no sir; but he did not believe me, and commenced whipping me; when I saw he was determined to make me say Aunt Fanny persuaded me, I acknowledged she did. He then stopped whipping me, and commenced at poor old Aunt Fanny, who did not know what could be the matter, but bore it patiently. Then he was satisfied, and said he hoped it was a lesson I would not soon forget.”¹⁴⁴

Similar confessions rest at the heart of the expanding belief in a widespread conspiracy during the summer of 1835. One should assume that these forced confessions speak as much to the violence being inflicted by the questioners as to the true knowledge of those being questioned.

One thing that remains clear in Campbell's narrative is the fact that slaves understood the power and influence they held through their willingness to abscond. While the balance of power clearly rested in the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 21

hands of their owners, many enslaved men and women made deliberate efforts to mitigate their conditions in whatever ways possible. Certainly, the mere inability to limit runaways weakened the authority of slave masters over those who remained on the plantation. Beyond this point, however, Campbell demonstrates the ability of slaves to knowingly use their economic worth to negatively impact their slaveholders' interests. At another point in his narrative, Campbell describes his efforts, along with fellow slaves, Barry and Lucinda, to escape to their master after being hired out to an abusive situation. While ultimately unsuccessful in their efforts to reach their master in Vicksburg, in part due to the betrayal of other slaves met along the way, Campbell emphasizes that their interests rested not in an effort to gain freedom, but rather the desire to inflict as much negative economic impact upon their abuser as possible. In his own words, Campbell states, "*We had no idea of getting free, but was intent of making him lose a good crop from lateness, knowing we would get whipped if we were caught.* [Italics mine]"¹⁴⁵

Campbell expresses a similar understanding of the ability of slaves to wield economic power over their enslavers through his discussion of the actions of a fellow slave. Campbell remembers Caleb as a slave, "...who

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 42

would run away without the least provocation; staying away until hunger compelled him to come back and go to work. He being a very smart hand master had not whipped him for so doing, but had made work harder when he came back.”¹⁴⁶ Caleb and his master understood the importance of his labor to his master’s interests. Due to his abilities as a worker, Caleb remained capable of periodically leaving his labors and returning with minimal consequences so long as he continued to perform well upon his return. However, this power was limited, and clearly not without risk. Campbell continues his discussion of Caleb thusly, “This fall he had run off in the busiest time of cotton-picking, and had staid away over a week. When he came back master determined he would not bear with such conduct any longer, and would cure him of the propensity.”¹⁴⁷ Having reached his limit, Caleb’s master responded with extreme brutality. He proceeded to get a barrel, and,

“After tying Caleb he made him lay down across the barrel, and put a fence-rail across his arms and ancles. Then he commanded me to get the bull-whip and hand saw... He began with the bull-whip. As he grew warm with whipping, he lost his temper, and he would whip as hard as he could, and would draw the saw across his bare back. The poor fellow hollowed and screamed without much success. The neighbors thought he was killing him, and came to see what was the matter. After giving him two hundred lashes, he told him, if he would promise not to run away any more, he would stop now. This he did, and master then untied him.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 58

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

¹⁴⁸ Ibid

This incident exemplifies the continuous struggles between masters and their slaves and lays bare the underlying tensions within the system.

Running was but one option held by slaves when faced with white brutality. At the conclusion of their failed attempt to escape to their master in Vicksburg, Barry, Lucinda, and Israel suffered harsh consequences. The three remained in the Vicksburg jail for eleven days before Jones arrived and paid the jail fees of forty-nine dollars and fifty cents along with six dollars for their captors in order to secure their release. Subsequently, “About ten o'clock the next day Mr. Jones came into the apartment where Barry and I was with three chains and padlocks. These he placed around our necks, and put the padlocks under our chins, and led us out of the prison.” As Campbell continues, it becomes clear that Jones’ primary interest is punishing the three runaways and reasserting the control challenged by the three slaves.

According to Campbell, Jones then,

“...chained all three of us together and then started for home, making us walk the entire distance of fifty-four miles without getting any thing to eat or drink. He then gave us a glass of liquor to invigorate us, and we reached home the next morning before breakfast. He gave each one a light whipping, and had a piece of iron weighing seven pounds put around Barry's ankle, six pounds around Lucinda's and six around mine, to cripple us in case we should attempt to run away again.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 50

Interestingly, Israel and Barry chose different ways to respond to their capture and subsequent punishment. Campbell recalls that, “A few days after this, Barry was missing again, but I thought that I would not try running away any more, but if he would not treat me right, I would defend myself, even if I had to hurt him.”¹⁵⁰ These dual sentiments express perhaps the two greatest tensions present in Mississippi during the buildup to the insurrection scare of 1835.

Other Mississippi slave testimonials also demonstrate the slaves’ willingness to push back against the violence of their enslavers. Annie Coley, a former slave in Harrison County, Mississippi provides a vivid first-hand account of such tensions in George Rawick’s, The American Slave. She relates the story of her plantation’s abusive overseer who earned a reputation for taking advantage of the women in the field. What is significant, however, is not only the brutality of the overseer, but also the manner in which the enslaved women chose to respond. According to Coley,

“One time he slammed a niggah woman down that was heavy, en cause her to hev her baby—dead. The niggah womens in the Quarters jumped on ‘im and say they gwine take him to a brushpile and burn him up. But their mens hollered for ‘em to turn him loose. Then Big Boss Jones came en made the womens go back to the Quarters. He said ‘I ain’ whipped these wenches fer a long time, en I low to whip ‘em dis evenin’.’ But all de womens hid in

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

the woods dat evening, ‘en boss never say no more about it. He sent the overseer away en never did hev no more overseers.”¹⁵¹

In a separate incident, Annie Coley describes her uncle who ran away with his master’s house servant. Shortly thereafter, “Big Boss” captured her uncle and returned him to the plantation where he, “whipped ‘em en kep im chained in the kitchen for two weeks. Ev’ry mayning’ Boss would go in the kitchen and whip ‘im a gain.”¹⁵² Annie’s grandfather, “Ole Mike,” worked as a wagon and buggy maker and, according to Annie provided substantial income for his owner. The treatment of his son, however, ultimately took a heavy toll on Ole Mike. Annie describes how her grandfather,

“...mek wagans en buggies fer all de white folks, en make big money fer Boss, over a hundred dollars a month. Ole Mike kep’ getting madder and madder bout the way Boss treat his boy. He went plum crazy, and run atter Boss in the big house, yellin’ “Dis day, my Boss en I, is both gwine to die.” Boss, he run up stairs, en ole Miss locked him in a closet en den lock herse’f in de room. Den ole Mike run to the kitchen and turn his boy loose. They went back to the quarters, and Mike went on wile for two, three days. Then he went back to the shop en when to work. But Boss was afraid of ‘im and never did talk to ‘im no more.”¹⁵³

As the recollections of Annie Coley demonstrate, violence towards slaves often came at a severe cost. Both slaves and their enslavers understood the great risks that the other represented.

¹⁵¹ George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Volume 7, part 2, Mississippi Narratives. (Greenwood Pub. Co., 1972), p. 441.

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 442

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 443

Throughout the telling of his narrative, Campbell demonstrates a belief that his retaliations against the brutalities of slavery held the potential for benefits as well as the more brutal consequences one might expect. Campbell viewed both running away and physical retaliation as methods of self-empowerment that ultimately held the potential to benefit not only himself, but also the conditions of his fellow enslaved men and women as well. Such a sentiment can be seen relatively early in his experiences as he becomes a chronic runaway upon being purchased by a planter by the name of Crookesty. Campbell's main grievance with Crookesty revolved not around excessive physically abusive treatment towards his slaves, but more substantially upon his belief that Crookesty neglected to provide adequate food for his enslaved laborers.

As was later the case when Campbell attempted to flee to his master in Vicksburg, Campbell made three attempts to run away from Crookesty and appeal to his previous master for protection. Upon being recaptured the third time, Campbell recounts the manner in which Crookesty, "led me out in the yard, and seated himself in front of the other gentlemen, holding me by the rope. There I stood, like a prisoner at the bar, with no one to plead or speak a word in my behalf."¹⁵⁴ One of the men, a blacksmith named

¹⁵⁴ Campbell, Bond and Free, p. 29.

Carlisle, acknowledged that he knew Campbell's owner and of his treatment of his slaves, but appealed to Campbell to refrain from continuing to run away due to the fact that, "Mr. Crookesty has bought you and is able to give you even better than you ever had."¹⁵⁵

Campbell took the opportunity presented in this appeal to present his views on the treatment of his master. Campbell states that he would continue his efforts because:

"I would never be satisfied; that I had to work from daylight until ten o'clock without a mouthful to eat; that then I only had a little ash-cake and some butter milk; at night only a little ask-cake and pot-liquor, with a very little piece of meat. Master gave the rope around my neck a sharp pull, but I continued and said, that this was not enough for any one who had to work in the field all day."¹⁵⁶

At this point, Crookesty took his property and returned to his plantation.

As one might expect, Campbell's insolence resulted in a harsh rebuke at the hands of Crookesty. Crookesty forced Campbell to walk the 8 miles back to the plantation and then tied Campbell's hands to the bedpost to ensure that he would be unable to run again that evening. Campbell slept that evening, "on the hard floor, with nothing to cover me, thinking of another chance to run away."¹⁵⁷ At first glance it appears that both Crookesty and Campbell remained unchanged from these events. The

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 30

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

following morning, Crookesty continued his efforts to publicly reassert authority over his slave as a message to Campbell and the broader slave population. Crookesty led Campbell to the yard,

“... and told me to take off my shirt. When I had done this he told me to put my arms around a Black Jack tree which stood there. (This tree was known by the name of Widow Black, for here the old man always tied all of the slaves when he whipped them--it was said that they did not always come off alive.) He then got two or three switches and commenced the whipping. I hollowed and screamed, but all to no purpose. I pleaded with his wife to intercede for me, but she replied, "I am not your mistress, I am old 'Black Tooth.'”¹⁵⁸

Similar appeals to his master likewise fell upon deaf ears.

Were his story to end here, the incident would simply remain one among a multitude of violent exertions of power on the part of slaveholders.

However, Campbell continues his tale by emphasizing his belief that his actions ultimately resulted in Crookesty changing his behavior. He continues:

“But all this action produced some good results. The next morning the horn blowed at eight instead of ten o'clock for breakfast; and although we found the ash-cake and butter-milk, there was more of it and some meat. We had meat again at dinner, at two o'clock, and bread and milk for supper. The hands looked upon me as a benefactor, all thanking me and expressing sorrow that I had to hug the widow, "for," said they, "we have never had three meals a day before since we belonged to Mr. Crookesty.

The next day after my whipping, Mr. Crookesty came to me in the field where I was working, and said, "Israel, I tell you what I will do; I have bought you, and you have caused me to give you a severe whipping for

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 30-31

running away; this I do not wish to have to do any more. Now, if you will be a good boy, and not run away any more, I will take you to wait on the house and let you be hostler at the stable, then you can have a chance of making some money, and I will give you enough to eat and wear."¹⁵⁹

This series of events exemplifies the constant struggles between slaves and their masters. Enslaved men and women made every effort possible to limit the brutalities of slavery by reminding their masters that their abusive actions often came with consequences. At this point of his life, for Campbell the consequence remained his commitment to steal himself and the labor represented by his body should his master fail to adequately provide for his enslaved population. Crookesty's response demonstrates his understanding of Campbell's actions, as well as the possible influence that Campbell held among his fellow slaves.

One should not be misled to presume that Crookesty's decision to acquiesce, at least in part, to the desires of Campbell and his fellow slaves resulted from a sense of morality or a desire to conduct his business with the interests of his slaves as a central focus. Crookesty's actions flowed primarily from a desire to maintain order and security across his plantation. Disorder, as exhibited by Campbell's constant willingness and ability to run away from the plantation, resulted in economic losses through the forced

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, pp. 31-32

efforts of the slave owner to retrieve his run away property as well as labor lost while Campbell remained away from the plantation. While the security of economic interests remained a central focus in shaping Crookesty's actions, a secondary, but perhaps even more severe threat, rested in the potential for what further unrest a perceived lack of authority and control on the plantation might foster. If Crookesty could not control an individual slave such as Campbell, other slaves across the plantation might likewise question his fundamental authority over them as well. Slaveholders understood that such questioning might lead to other, more direct forms of slave resistance. In an era dominated by fears of unrest associated with names such as David Walker or Nat Turner, Mississippi planters associated even the slightest loss of control with potentially catastrophic consequences.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ The publication of David Walker's Appeal in 1829 and Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, along with the emergence of William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionist movement throughout the 1830s, placed many southern defenders of slavery in a defensive stance. Not only were they forced to present arguments in defense of the institution, but with the confluence of these events many southerners feared the imminence of collective violent unrest at the hands of the enslaved population. David Walker, Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together With a Preamble, To the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular and Very Expressly, To those of the United States of America. (Revised and Published by David Walker, Boston, MA., 1829). For discussions of the impacts of David Walker's Appeal, Nat Turner's uprising, and the rise of the abolitionist movement on the psyche of southern slaveholders see, Hasan Crockett, "The Incendiary Pamphlet: David Walker's Appeal in Georgia," Journal of Negro History, vol. 86, No. 3 (Summer 2001), p. 305-318; Peter P. Hinks, To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); John W. Cromwell, "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection," Journal of Negro History, Vol. 5, No. 2 (April 1920), p. 208-234; Scot French, The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); Stephen B. Oates, The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Donald M. Jacobs, Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston (Bloomington: Indiana University Press for the Boston Aethenaeum, 1993); John Stauffer, The

Slaveholders clearly viewed a slave's willingness to abscond as a threat to the stability of their plantations and to the broader system of slavery. However, just as slave masters viewed violence and the lash as the ultimate weapons in defense of slavery, they similarly viewed their slaves' willingness to use violence in opposition to their condition as the most severe threat to their slave society.

In analyzing the meaning of these events, it is important to recognize what Campbell and other slaves may have taken from the exchange. While remaining cognizant of the brutal consequences associated with attempts to challenge the conditions of slavery, the slave community also witnessed the potential benefits associated with such challenges. While Campbell initially emphasizes his willingness to flee the plantation in order to push back against the abuses of slavery, at later points of his narrative he demonstrates a willingness to retaliate physically as well. It is possible that his analysis of the benefits achieved through resistance through flight ultimately led to further, more direct resistance in subsequent years. As he continued to benefit individually, and on behalf of his fellow slaves, Campbell became emboldened to push forward, ultimately resulting in his appointment to the position of overseer.

Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race (Harvard University Press, 2001); Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

Campbell's willingness to resist, and Crookesty's desire to maintain order on his plantation resulted in a cessation of abuse by Crookesty. Tensions clearly remained, but following the previously described beating, Campbell maintains that, "all of us had plenty to eat and wear, and never did he have occasion to whip me again."¹⁶¹ For a number of years subsequently, Crookesty hired Campbell out annually to various planters. His experiences with Crookesty buttressed his belief that his willingness to flee, usually back to Crookesty as opposed to freedom, provided him with the leverage to mitigate his conditions. Following his encounters with Jones and his unsuccessful attempts to run, Campbell's perceptions as to how he could impact his condition began to change. As mentioned previously, Campbell pledged to forgo running away in the future and that he would instead defend himself physically from future abuses.

Upon hearing of Jones' treatment of Campbell, Lucinda and Barry, Crookesty attempted to reacquire his slaves from Jones. Jones agreed to return the slaves under the condition that Crookesty pay for their jail fees and the costs associated with hiring three additional slaves for the period while Israel, Lucinda, and Barry had been away from the plantation. Upon Crookesty's refusal to acquiesce to these conditions, Crookesty and Jones

¹⁶¹ Campbell, Bond and Free. p. 32.

brought the case before arbitrators who found in favor of Crookesty.¹⁶²

Through his willingness to run, initially from Crookesty himself and later from Jones, Campbell forged a condition whereby Crookesty believed it to be in his best interest to intercede on Campbell's behalf.

Finally, after having hired Campbell out for a number of years, Crookesty sold Campbell to Mr. Garner, a man Crookesty described as, "a very good man."¹⁶³ Unlike his previous owner, Garner owned a smaller amount of land and only four slaves. He worked in the fields alongside his slaves and served as his own overseer. Over time, however, Garner acquired numerous additional slaves, including a young woman Campbell describes as, "a beautiful girl, nearly white, with long black hair, and jet-black eyes" who would soon become his wife.¹⁶⁴ As the number of slaves increased along with the workload, Garner subsequently hired an overseer, a man named Mr. Cotton. Campbell describes Cotton as, "quite stout, weighing I think about one-hundred seventy five pounds."¹⁶⁵ This proved to be a turning point in the life of Israel Campbell.

Despite Garner requiring that Cotton work in the fields alongside the slaves, Cotton sought to maintain authority through use of the lash. Israel

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 51

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 53

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 57

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 59

Campbell and two of his compatriots entered into an agreement that should one of them be whipped by Cotton, the other two would intercede, and that the, “three of us boys agreed together to help each other if he should undertake to do it, and beat him almost to death. Relying upon their honor for sticking to the bargain, I was in no way backward in answering to his summons”¹⁶⁶ Buttressed by such a pledge, Campbell showed no hesitation in responding to Cotton’s efforts to whip him for failing to discard shrubs in the manner that Garner had previously asked of him.

Cotton summoned Campbell and demanded that he remove his coat to receive his stripes, a request to which Campbell responded by stating, “My master does not make me take off my coat, and I shall not do it for you.”

Cotton then pledged to beat the coat off of the indolent slave, and proceeded to attack him. Campbell describes the encounter:

“I did not think I could whip him; but there was another of the boys working close by, and I expected him to come to my help, as we had agreed, as soon as he should commence whipping me. He then made an attack on me. As soon as he raised his hand to strike me, I seized him and looked him straight in the face. The color left it, and I saw he was badly frightened. He dropped his switch and seized me. We then stood there like two bull-dogs, each afraid of the other. He then hallowed to a black man who was working close by, to come and help him. But Uncle Bob, as he was called, would not come. I then called him, but he would not come.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 60

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 61

Campbell continues,

“He then threw me down, and, as I fell, I caught his thumb in my mouth. This made him release me, when both of us sprung up and made at each other again. By this time I saw that I would have to do my own fighting, and went at it in earnest. I seized him by his shirt, and tore it half off, and presently tore the other half, leaving him shirtless. He, seeing that I was too much for him, gave up the idea of whipping me, and told me to go to my work. I was as willing to do this as he was to get clear of me; for I must confess that if I had thought the other boys would not have come to my help, I should have run. Confidence often accomplishes more than strength.”¹⁶⁸

Little change occurred following this encounter, as Garner chose to discipline neither his slave, nor the overseer. However, Israel Campbell viewed this as a seminal moment in his life.

There are a number of similarities between this portion of Campbell’s narrative and the recollections of Frederick Douglass as Douglass described his physical encounter with Edward Covey, a slaveholder renowned for his abilities to “break” troublesome slaves. For Douglass, standing up to Covey represented a moment where he was able to reclaim his manhood, a moment that laid the foundation for his subsequent determination to gain his freedom. Douglass describes this moment as a time where,

“My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 61-62

forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me."¹⁶⁹

In his narrative, Twelve Years a Slave, Solomon Northrup also portrays the moment when he likewise determined not to receive a beating at the hands of his master. Northrup's resistance sprang initially from a sense of justice, feeling, as he states that he "had been faithful—that I was guilty of no wrong whatever, and deserved commendation rather than punishment."¹⁷⁰ Feeling justified in his self defense, Northrup proclaims that, "My fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death."¹⁷¹ As was the case in the confrontation between Israel Campbell and his overseer, Northrup's owner, Master Tibeats, demanded that Northrup remove his clothing in anticipation of his beating. Northrup, like Campbell, refused to submit to the wishes of his master. Master Tibeats raised his hand to strike Northrup, but

"Before the blow descended...I had caught him by the collar of the coat, and drawn him closely to me. Reaching down, I seized him by the ankle, and pushed him back with the other hand, he fell over on the ground. Putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot upon his neck. He was completely in my power.

¹⁶⁹ Frederick Douglass and Benjamin Quarles, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 113.

¹⁷⁰ Solomon Northrup, Sue Eakin, and Joseph Logsdon, Twelve Years a Slave (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), p. 79-80.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 80

My blood was up. It seemed to course through my veins like fire. In the frenzy of my madness I snatched the whip from his hand. He struggled with all his power; swore that I should not live to see another day; and that he would tear out my heart. But his struggles and his threats were alike in vain. I cannot tell how many times I struck him. Blow after blow fell fast upon his wriggling form.”¹⁷²

Unlike Douglass, who emerged emboldened by his defiance, Northrup’s enraged actions were quickly followed by a sense of fear and regret. Nonetheless, for Northrup the moment proved to be no less significant, reinforcing his understandings of the brutalities and tensions inherent throughout the plantation South. Likewise, the incident served as a reminder to Master Tibeats, and to southern whites more broadly, as to the dangers present in each embittered slave.

Israel Campbell’s confrontation with Cotton proved no less significant. The immediate aftermath, on the surface, appears to be anticlimactic. After hearing the arguments of Campbell and Cotton, Garner chose to take no direct action against either party. By all appearances, however, Garner seems to have taken an interest in the treatment of his slaves and the impact that Cotton’s treatment had on their productivity. Additionally, Campbell served clear notice to Cotton as to the fact that he would not easily submit to further abuses at the hands of his overseer. Campbell was not alone among the slave community in his ability to read

¹⁷² Ibid.

and understand the shifting power dynamics taking place on the Garner plantation.

Cotton initially reacted to the skirmish and to Garner's response by refraining from further whippings as overseer. This apparent restraint diminished substantially with the approach of cotton-picking season. Whether due to the pressures associated with bringing in a strong crop or frustrations with his interactions with the enslaved people, Campbell claims that,

“By this time, Mr. Cotton seemed to have forgotten master's displeasure at his whipping the hands. So one day he whipped a colored woman for some slight offence. She told master of it, and also that he had said she was too great a favorite of master's. Master became very angry about this, and told Mr. Cotton never to strike one of the hands as long as he was with him.”¹⁷³

Garner's response to this incident left none of the ambiguities seen following the conflict between Campbell and Cotton. Garner required Cotton to manage his enslaved laborers without use of the lash.

At the end of the year, Garner made three substantial decisions that placed Israel Campbell in a unique position to provide insight into the suspected slave insurrection of 1835. First, Garner sold his property and purchased another plantation “seven miles west of a town called Mount

¹⁷³ Campbell, Bond and Free, p. 62.

Vernon.”¹⁷⁴ This move placed Campbell, and the Garner plantation near the center of the suspected plot. Additionally, at the close of the year, Garner decided not to keep Cotton on as his overseer. With the tensions and conflicts of the previous year, such a decision should not come as much of a surprise. However, Garner’s next decision placed Israel Campbell in a position that set him apart from the vast majority of enslaved men and women throughout the Deep South, both in terms of his position as a laborer as well as in regards to his status. As Campbell recounts the discussion with his master, he states that, “After Mr. Cotton had gone, master came to me and said— ‘Now, Israel, I’m going to make you my overseer. I want you to go right ahead; and if anything goes wrong, I want you to let me know it.’ I entered my new office with misgivings as to my ability, but I was determined to do the best I could.”¹⁷⁵

Israel Campbell struggled, internally, with this appointment. He discusses a preference for having remained one of the hands on the plantation as opposed to serving as overseer, stating that, “ I found, however, by my experience, that it was much easier to think of being an overseer than to practice it. Master had, at this time, about thirty slaves, and I often felt

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 64

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

that I had rather be one of the hands than overseer.”¹⁷⁶ In fact, upon hearing of the presence of a slave on an adjoining plantation who had previously served as an overseer, Campbell contemplated suggesting that Garner bring him in to fill the position. Campbell’s fellow slaves resisted such a suggestion. Campbell recounts that, “when I told my intention, none of the hands would listen to my resigning; so, for their sakes, I continued on.”¹⁷⁷ It is perhaps the fact that Campbell had not aspired to such a position of “authority” in relation to the other slaves on the plantation that perhaps explains their desire for him to keep the title.

Throughout the course of his life, Campbell maintained a commitment to a belief in just treatment by slave management towards the enslaved men and women, so far as “justice” could be found within the unjust system of slavery. He believed that a faithful slave, or a hard-working slave deserved certain basic protections, but also that slaves maintained the right to respond if unwarranted abuse were to take place. Having worked in the fields with many of the men and women now placed under his control, slaves across the plantation remained able to view Campbell as a comrade rather than an outsider even as he ascended to this higher position.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 65

¹⁷⁷ Ibid

Campbell's elevation to the position of overseer also speaks to how Garner viewed his slave. Over his time on the plantation, Campbell had shown himself to be a hard worker. Additionally, Garner clearly understood Israel Campbell to be a man of strength. One would assume that Garner viewed Campbell as a leader within the slave community. Perhaps Garner did not fully "trust" Campbell, but he clearly felt that Campbell represented the best option in preserving order on the plantation and in helping to keep his economic ventures profitable.

Campbell's elevation to the position of overseer allows also for a unique lens into the descriptions of the potential emerging plot. While the details of the suspected uprising, along with the investigation and responses by Mississippi whites are discussed later, Campbell's initial observations of the emerging frenzy help demonstrate the connections between patterns of tension and unrest that lay at the center of antebellum Mississippi's slave society and the events that were to follow.

Campbell's status as an overseer on the Garner plantation allowed him to maintain a status separate from the wider enslaved population, but also created a sense of uncertainty and distrust among the white population. Surely, Garner demonstrated a sense of trust in selecting him for the position. However, to other whites throughout the area, Campbell's status as

a presumed leader within the slave community, along with his ability to interact more freely with slaves in the area created an air of suspicion not dissimilar to Vicksburg's citizens' views of horse thieves and gamblers. Many whites assumed that if an insurrection plot existed, Campbell, the slave overseer, would certainly possess knowledge about the plot.

Campbell discussed the ways in which local whites began to police their neighborhood as talk of an uprising began to emerge. Though no uprising ultimately took place, Campbell stresses the fact that "many poor fellows suffered on suspicion of being concerned with raising it."¹⁷⁸ His description shows the efforts of local whites to garner information from enslaved and free Blacks in the area in order to ultimately quash any attempts to rebel through demonstrations of their overwhelming physical power and their willingness to violently confront any problems that may arise. His observation that "many poor fellows suffered on suspicion" of involvement only goes to buttress a contention that slaveholders held free reign regarding who they might question and what methods of coercion they might employ. The innocence or guilt of those being questioned remained an irrelevant aspect of the equation and demonstrates how local conceptions of "justice," especially during periods of perceived unrest quickly coalesced

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 70

around images of individual and community self defense with no regard for the rights of the accused.

More telling than the general description, however, is Campbell's recollection of his first direct encounter with those attempting to suppress unrest. According to Campbell, two men came to his home late one evening to inquire as to what information he might have regarding the suspected uprising. The questioners awakened Campbell from his sleep and quickly became impatient as he apparently responded too slowly in opening his door. One of the men "seized me by the collar, having a bowie-knife in one hand" and immediately set about questioning what Campbell knew of the threat.¹⁷⁹ Campbell repeatedly reassured his inquisitors that he had no knowledge of any uprising among the enslaved population. Finally, wrote Campbell, "convincing themselves that I was ignorant, they left, warning me, however, not to be caught outside our own plantation nor to talk to any strange negroes or white men."¹⁸⁰

The men made it clear to Campbell that they believed an uprising was imminent and that plans had been laid to "kill off the white people and free the negroes. After giving me some brandy, and again warning me, that if I

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 71

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

did not heed their advice, I would be shot, they left my house.”¹⁸¹

Campbell’s experience served the dual purposes of gathering what information might be available concerning the assumed uprising while simultaneously reinforcing the authority of whites in the area and their willingness to violently oppose any contestations to the status quo. The exertion of such power over Campbell, due in part to his unique position as an overseer, provided slaveholders with an opportunity to accentuate their dominance over not only the individual (Campbell), but more broadly over the enslaved population as well.

As Campbell expands his description beyond his personal experience to include his view of the happenings surrounding him, it becomes clear that efforts were made to terrorize Blacks throughout the community. In the days following his encounter with those investigating the early stages of the plot Campbell describes his recollections as follows:

They, with other parties, went around all the slave quarters. Many they scared so badly, that they told lies of every description, and suffered for it. When they thought they had succeeded in quelling the insurrection, they commenced punishing those they had caught. Some they hung, others they burned, and some of those they thought not so guilty they pulled cats back-wards on their bare backs. Two of the party hung themselves in the prison.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 72

¹⁸² Ibid.

As the days continued, the actions of local whites, as described by Campbell, amounted to nothing short of terrorism. Campbell states that, “I saw the place where the slaughter took place. Two large wooden forks, with a pole laid from one to the other, served for the gallows, and they told me men hung there for two days and nights.” After describing their desire to seek out steam doctors and preachers, who they believed the largest threats, Campbell states that, “...when once in their grasp, there was very little mercy shown them. The heads of the preachers they cut off and put on poles, and placed them along the road, where they remained until they were bleached. I saw several of their skulls in an apothecary store at Mount Vernon the latter part of that fall.”¹⁸³

Just as Campbell’s position as an overseer led to suspicions concerning his involvement in any potential uprising, such was also the case for a local blacksmith, named Joe, owned by Captain Sansberry. Joe is described in a letter written by James Mabry, a planter who served on the investigatory committee initially formed to respond to the conspiracy threat, as “a blacksmith, and works for the public.”¹⁸⁴ Joe drew suspicion throughout the white community due to access provided by his position as a

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 73-4

¹⁸⁴ Letter from Jesse Mabry to Charles Shackelford, September 20, 1835. Reprinted in Thomas Shackelford, The Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi at Livingston in July, 1835, in Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implicated in a Contemplated Insurrection in This State. (Mayson and Smoot, Jackson, MS)., p. 7.

“public” blacksmith. He interacted freely with slaves, poor whites, and planters as a matter of business. His ability to move freely across racial and social lines at the heart of Mississippi slavery allowed him, in the eyes of local planters, the ability to share information that might foster an emerging conspiracy. Mabry assumed that, at the very least, Joe would possess knowledge of the plot.

Before approaching Joe, Mabry informed the two men accompanying him on the inquisition that he had recently sent Sam to the blacksmith’s shop. Mabry describes Sam as a slave that, “I consider a great scoundrel, and I felt confident that if Joe knew anything of the intended insurrection that Sam was in the scrape.”¹⁸⁵ In a sense, Mabry arrived at Joe’s door having assumed him guilty due in large part to his interactions with a slave whose character Mabry viewed as flawed. The irony that such an interaction took place due to Mabry’s instructions seems lost in this moment.

Upon arriving at Joe’s shop, Joe admitted to knowing Sam and to having seen him twice in recent weeks in his shop. Joe denied, however, any involvement in planning insurrection, nor knowledge of any such plot. Mabry states that, “We then called for a rope, and tied his hands, and told him that we were in possession of some of their conversation, and that he

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

should tell the whole of it.”¹⁸⁶ What followed, in many ways resembled Israel Campbell’s false admissions as a young boy when forced, at the end of the whip, to implicate his innocent aunt in his attempt to run away.¹⁸⁷ According to Mabry, “...after some time he agreed, that if we would not punish him that he would tell all that he could recollect. He said that he knew what we wanted, and would tell the whole, but that he himself had nothing to do with the business.”¹⁸⁸ There is no discussion as to what forms of coercion Mabry and his compatriots used following the binding of Joe’s hands. However, the result is that Joe made up his mind to tell his questioners “what they wanted to hear” in order to stop the abuse. The information that they received helped to support the narrative already emerging throughout much of the white community. The veracity of that information is no more certain than the guilt of Aunt Fanny many years earlier.

These initial responses by local whites in questioning Joe and Israel Campbell represent their preferred method of responding to a suspected threat from their enslaved population. Though these events appear in Campbell’s autobiography in part because he viewed them as extreme or

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Campbell, *Bond and Free*, p. 21.

¹⁸⁸ Letter from Jesse Mabry to Charles Shackelford, September 20, 1835. Reprinted in Shackelford, *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County*, p. 7.

exceptional, in essence these actions represent normalcy among plantation society. Slaveholders and their allies throughout southern communities placed the power to regulate and control their enslaved people directly in the hands of those closest to them. Their tactics and abuses remained unchallenged by outside authorities.

It is not until the threat to their lives and their community comes to be viewed as an exceptional threat that slaveholders willingly move to the exceptional response of ceding certain levels of authority over their enslaved property to the broader community, as expressed through the creation of the committees of safety. In late June of 1835, many slaveholders in Mississippi believed that they had reached such a threshold. As the size and scope of the imagined uprising continued to grow in their minds and in the press, planters viewed it as a threat to the entire community; a threat requiring the full power and engagement of all considered part of that community. The resulting investigation and terror is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

A DEADLY MIX: VIOLENCE, FEAR, AND INSURRECTION IN ANTEBELLUM MISSISSIPPI

The veracity of charges of an impending uprising notwithstanding, local townspeople in and around Livingston, Mississippi never doubted its imminence. The foundation for such fears sprung from black and white interactions in the days leading up to the suspected plot, as well as through long-term engagements as the institution of slavery developed in Mississippi. Local whites created clear images of the enslaved population and of those accused of aiding them in the suspected insurrectionary plot. As Israel Campbell's experiences demonstrate, these images of blacks and whites in Mississippi emerged from their interactions with one another, ultimately allowing each group of people to formulate views of themselves and the "other." These images, in turn helped to shape the methods of investigation and response over the course of the summer of 1835. The true value, in terms of gaining an understanding of this slave society and the people of the region is obtained not solely through an examination of the plot itself, whether "real" or imagined, but more so through viewing the process by which the townspeople gained information about the plot and

how they ultimately responded. As will be discussed, an analysis of the process of investigation and punishment in response to fears of insurrection provides a method for better understanding the meanings of community and order in antebellum Mississippi, and the role that exertions of power (often through violence and fear) played in the maintenance of each.

In late June of 1835, citizens in and around Clinton, Mississippi first caught wind of a suspected uprising. As fears of an attempted slave insurrection reached a high point, merely a week after the initial discovery, white citizens believed that they were in the midst of an immense conspiracy. Dr. Joshua Cotton, a local steam doctor, purportedly provided the townspeople with a confession that whites saw as the depth and scope of the conspiracy. Cotton confessed at the gallows on July 4th 1835, a day coinciding with the commencement of the hangings of the gamblers in Vicksburg. Cotton outlined a scenario in which he and his accomplices conspired to agitate the local enslaved population not with the purpose “of liberating them but for plunder.”¹⁸⁹ Cotton alleged a connection to the infamous John Murrell gang, and a desire to carry out Murrell’s plot as laid

¹⁸⁹ Cotton’s Confession as reprinted in Charles Shackelford’s account of the investigation. Thomas Shackelford, The Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi at Livingston in July, 1835, in Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implicated in a Contemplated Insurrection in This State. (Mayson and Smoot, Jackson, MS).

out in Stewart's pamphlet from the previous year.¹⁹⁰ Cotton described a plot in which the instigators hoped to engage the "most daring scoundrels" among the enslaved population and incite them to lead slaves on large plantations throughout the region in the brutal slaughter of whites. Cotton ultimately implicated numerous black and white men as being involved in this scheme before asserting the continued presence of a threat to the community and finally warning them in his last words to "take care to night and tomorrow night."¹⁹¹ Cotton's death, rather than ending the threat, served as a springboard for an escalation of both fear and violence throughout the community.

Slavery is central to the events leading up to and coming from Dr. Cotton's "confession." However, when viewed in relation to the events in Vicksburg, the perceived insurrection threat sheds light on the ways in

¹⁹⁰ Virgil Stewart published a pamphlet in 1835 taking credit for having captured the infamous John Murrell. Within this pamphlet, Stewart claims that Murrell was far more than a mere horse thief, slave thief and swindler, but rather the leader of an immense murderous clan. In this pamphlet, Stewart asserts that Murrell and his cohort have designs on using slave unrest and insurrection as a means of plundering plantations throughout the entire South. Questions as to the character of Stewart emerged shortly after publication of his story and can also be found within various monographs from more recent scholars as well. For Stewart's story of the capture of John Murrell see H. R. Howard, The History of Virgil A. Stewart: and His Adventure in Capturing and Exposing the "Great Western Land Pirate" and His Gang, in Connexion with the Evidence; also of the Trials, Confessions, and Execution of a Number of Murrell's Associates in the State of Mississippi During the Summer of 1835, and the Execution of Five Professional Gamblers by the Citizens of Vicksburg, on the 6th July, 1835. Microforms Hobart and William Smith Colleges (New York: Harper, 1836). For descriptions of Virgil Stewart and questions as to his character the veracity of his recollections see Joshua Rothman, Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), pp. 17-50; Michael A. Bellesiles, Lethal Imagination: Violence and Brutality in America (New York: New York University Press, 1999); and Walter Johnson, River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁹¹ Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, "Joshua Cotton's Confession."

which slavery and its inherent abuses fit within a broader society built on the foundation of a culture of violence. This culture of violence played an instructional role in the implementation and dissemination of force and the maintenance of control of this enslaved population and those with whom they came in contact. It was not only the brutality of slavery spilling over into the surrounding communities of antebellum Mississippi. The events of that 1835 summer also reveal how the larger community's embracing of violence could dictate the strategies that slaveholders and their subordinates used to exert power and maintain control over whites as well as blacks.

Townpeople considered the events described by Cotton as a true outline of a plot that was underway during the summer of 1835. Prior to his "confession" however, townspeople believed a much more localized uprising was in the works. Mississippians first began to suspect trouble in Beattie's Bluff near Livingston in late June of 1835. The initial actions of the local citizenry indicate their belief that if an uprising was imminent, it was the result of planning on the part of enslaved men and women themselves, and this unrest was relegated to a few of the local plantations in the area. Citizens responded quickly but not with the urgency or sophistication that was later manifested. Reports of the initial discovery of the suspected uprising depict a variety of scenarios under which suspicion

began to spread throughout the larger community and surrounding areas. While there were certain differences in how the discovery was discussed, a number of common threads existed. In each case, early cognizance of the threatening conditions resulted as much from circumstance as from the diligence and coordination of the white population. If nothing else, the idea that the enslaved population was capable of carrying out such a plot, suggested a condition of less than complete order and control, despite assertions of stability on the part of the slaveholding class.¹⁹² Real or imagined, white anxieties about security within the slave system shaped their actions and reactions to what they perceived as a crisis.

One commonly relayed description of the plot placed its origins on the plantation of Harvey Latham in Beattie's Bluff, near Clinton. Harvey's wife, Mrs. Latham, grew suspicious of a number of her slaves whom she claimed had "become indolent, disobedient, and sometimes displayed insulting ways."¹⁹³ In response to an increasing unease due to her perception of the actions of her slaves, Mrs. Latham began to observe them more closely which ultimately led to her overhearing a discussion between her

¹⁹² For examples, see MDAH Madison County 1835 Uprising, subject file, "Before the War in Madison County," Charles Elon Bowering, Sr., p. 8; Harnett T. Kane, *Natchez on the Mississippi*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), p. 73; and Thomas Shackelford, *The Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi at Livingston in July, 1835, in Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implicated in a Contemplated Insurrection in This State*. (Mayson and Smoot, Jackson, MS), p. 6.

¹⁹³ MDAH Madison County 1835 Uprising, subject file, "Before the War in Madison County," Charles Elon Bowering, Sr., p. 8

nurse and another of her slaves. She was unable to discern details concerning the coming uprising; however, Mrs. Latham claimed she overheard her nurse lamenting to her fellow slave in discussing the child resting in her arms that "...this is such a pretty little baby to kill!"¹⁹⁴ In the official report written on behalf of the Committee of Safety following the series of events in the summer of 1835, the conversation is described in even more detail. Responding to the comments lamenting the need to kill the child, the male slave is said to have replied that, though it is a pity to kill the infant, "...it must be done, and that it would be doing a great favor, as it would go to heaven and escape the troubles of this world."¹⁹⁵ As one might expect, Mrs. Latham perceived such a statement as acknowledgement of some sort of insurrectionary plot on the part of her slaves. Alarmed by the dangerous implications of such a proclamation, she immediately raised the alarm, alerting the townspeople of the insidious conversation witnessed among her enslaved people.

The Charleston Carrier received a copy of a letter written in Tyger Bayou of Madison County in mid-July providing different details of the discovery of the suspected plot. This description failed to make any mention

¹⁹⁴ Harnett T. Kane, Natchez on the Mississippi. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), p. 73.

¹⁹⁵ Thomas Shackelford, The Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi at Livingston in July, 1835, in Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implicated in a Contemplated Insurrection in This State. (Mayson and Smoot, Jackson, MS), p. 6.

of the involvement of Mrs. Latham. The letter's writer ascribed credit for discovery of the plot to two unnamed "gentlemen" who, like Mrs. Latham, overheard discussions among the enslaved population of Madison County on June 29th of a developing plot against local whites.¹⁹⁶ Similarly, the Clinton Gazette reported that a few days prior to July 4th, "various circumstances excited suspicion in the minds of a few respectable citizens of Madison County, in the neighborhood of Beattie's Bluff, of an insurrection among the slaves of that settlement being about to occur."¹⁹⁷ According to this report, local citizens overheard several slaves discussing the prospects of self-emancipation and the killing of whites throughout the region. As was the case in the letter published in the Charleston Carrier, this report made no mention of the involvement of Mrs. Latham in the discovery.

Not all recollections depicted discovery of the plot as the result of carelessness or the lack of discretion on the part of slaves. An extract from a letter written by Dr. William H. Thomson, a Clinton resident described as a "gentleman of high standing," maintained that detection of the threat resulted from a "faithful slave" reporting the plot to his master. In this July 5th 1835 letter, Dr. Thomson contends that slaves constructed a plan over a period of at least six months for the execution of a "massacre" in which "no

¹⁹⁶ Liberator Boston: August 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136. Reprinted from the Charleston Carrier.

¹⁹⁷ MDAH "The Horrible Conspiracy," Clinton (Miss) Gazette, July 11, 1835.

doubt but that thousands of whites would have been murdered.” An enslaved man, said to have been “in all the secrets” and “high in demand” supported the validity of his claims by placing his slaveholder in a position where “from his concealment, he could overhear one of their night meetings, at which the whole scheme was discussed.”¹⁹⁸ The slaveholder, wearing a disguise, is said to have attended a meeting a few days prior to July 4th near his plantation, designed to determine the “proper time and mode” of executing the planned uprising.¹⁹⁹ Thomson acknowledges the presence of various “rumors and contradictory accounts” regarding the suspected plot’s discovery. All, however, suggest that the discovery resulted from information relayed directly from a slave to his or her slaveholder.²⁰⁰

These various narratives of the discovery reveal several white perceptions about their slaves: the necessity of “base white” instigators to foment slave unrest; the inability of enslaved people to maintain the secrecy of a planned conspiracy; and white images of the faithful slave. All scenarios reinforced public thinking that the enslaved population was

¹⁹⁸ Liberator (1831-1865) Boston: Aug 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 123.

¹⁹⁹ MDAH, John A. Murrell Clippings, Letter from Dr. William H. Thomson of Hinds County, Mississippi to his Wife, July 12th, 1835.

²⁰⁰ MDAH, John A. Murrell Clippings, Letter from Dr. William H. Thomson of Hinds County, Mississippi to his wife, July 12th, 1835. Questions concerning the role of the “faithful slave” in discovery of insurrectionary plots are not unique to this suspected plot. See for example Douglas R. Egerton, He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey (New York: Knopf, 1999); Edward A. Pearson, ed., Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Records of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and David Robertson, Denmark Vesey (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

incapable of sustaining an insurrection, but were indeed capable of desiring to create one.²⁰¹

The writings of S. S. Prentiss, who later served as the Governor of Mississippi, demonstrate the complexity of attitudes that many white Mississippians held toward the enslaved. In a February 1828 letter to his mother, Prentiss described the enslaved population as essential to the maintenance and development of the Southern economy, yet also complained that their work was “done in a very poor and slovenly manner.”²⁰² Far from being one of the South’s more staunch pro-slavery advocates, Prentiss was among a dwindling group of slaveholders who still considered the system of slavery a “necessary evil.”²⁰³ He certainly thought slaves were inferior beings; men and women of limited intellect who served a necessary purpose as laborers. Prentiss recognized their dependency on

²⁰¹ MDAH, John A. Murrell Clippings, Letter from Dr. William H. Thomson of Hinds County, Mississippi to his wife, July 12th, 1835. A similar argument is made in the previously mentioned July 5th letter that claims that the insurrection appeared to have “been headed by white men.” Liberator (1831-1865) Boston: Aug 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 123.

²⁰² George Lewis Prentiss, A Memoir of S. S. Prentiss. (New York: C. Scribner, 1855) p. 70. Letter from S. S. Prentiss to his mother dated February 12, 1828.

²⁰³ Ibid. p. 107. Letter from S.S. Prentiss to his brother dated July 25, 1831.

During the antebellum period, the defense of slavery transitioned from a discussion of the institution as a “necessary evil” as described by Thomas Jefferson, among others, to an argument that slavery was “a positive good,” a defense advocated by John C. Calhoun and other pro-slavery advocates of the era. See Thomas Jefferson, Edited with an introduction and notes by William Peden, Notes on the State of Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press For the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1955); John C. Calhoun, “Speech on the Reception of Abolition Petitions, Delivered in the Senate, February 6th, 1837,” in Richard R. Cralle, ed., Speeches of John C. Calhoun, Delivered in the House of Representatives and in the Senate of the United States (New York: D. Appleton, 1853), 625-33. For an analysis of the transition from “necessary evil” to “positive good” ideology see George Fredrickson, Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on African American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).

slave labor. Additionally, he emphasized his belief their slaves were “well clothed, well fed, and kindly treated.” While some planters occasionally “treat their slaves cruelly and inhumanly,” Prentiss asserted that such activities lay outside the acceptable framework of Mississippi slave society, and those who engaged in such abusive behavior suffered the rebuke of their community.²⁰⁴ As for the slaves, rather than sowing the seeds of discontent and insurrection, Prentiss argued that enslaved people of Mississippi “appear to enjoy life, and are, for aught I see, as happy as their masters.”²⁰⁵

Yet Prentiss also acknowledged the system’s inherent dangers and problems and was fully aware of the threat enslaved men and women posed. In another letter Prentiss advocated a strong public response to a threatened uprising. In his words, force was essential not only to meet immediate rebelliousness, but to send a message that would “prevent a recurrence of similar events – at least for a long period of time.”²⁰⁶ The events in and around Livingston accentuate the gap between the proclaimed image of stability and black docility and the often-unacknowledged recognition of an ever-present danger and deadly threat.

²⁰⁴ George Lewis Prentiss, *A Memoir of S. S. Prentiss*. (New York: C. Scribner, 1855) p. 107. Letter from S.S. Prentiss to his brother dated July 25, 1831.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 70

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 162. Letter from S. S. Prentiss to his mother dated September 19, 1835.

Each of these scenarios surrounding the discovery of the plot held at its core a ready belief on the part of local whites that the enslaved people were capable and willing to execute an uprising. The scenarios, often suggesting a happenstance conspiracy discovery, as well as local whites' discussion of the plot, speak to white acknowledgement, despite their desires to avoid openly doing so, of holes and weaknesses inherent in the slave system upon which they were so dependent. Local whites were under no illusions about the menacing threat this large enslaved population posed. Despite white professions of enslaved fealty, docility, and meekness, enslaved men and women simply could not be trusted to maintain their *place*. Consequently, when suspecting an impending threat, local whites reached for the most effective tool for protection and survival in their minds: swift and brutal violence. Violence and brutality remained central in each aspect of white responses, beginning with the investigation and capture of suspected plotters, to the various forms of punishment imposed and the clear messages that each death represented.

White Mississippians felt no need to create the basic trappings of law when dealing with a threat they believed to be limited to their personal property. Although backed by the full power of "the law," in the case of *North Carolina v Mann* Judge Thomas Ruffin of North Carolina expressed

the sentiments of southern slaveholders writing that “the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect.”²⁰⁷

Slaveholders held the authority and the capability to impress their will upon their enslaved property in order to maintain order and control. Their actions did not require the sanction of the state or set of laws, although they clearly had the silent (and often open) approval and support of both.

Regardless of how information suggesting a slave insurrection was intercepted, the townspeople of Clinton found the threat sufficiently plausible to warrant further investigation. Information quickly spread to surrounding counties, and on June 30th, the townspeople of Livingston in Madison County came together in order to assess the threat and to formulate an adequate response. Leading members of the community put together a report on the purported threat and presented it to the larger community on July 1st, the following day. Sufficiently alarmed, they immediately ordered two slaves, one belonging to Ruel Blake and the other belonging to William Johnson, be brought in for questioning.²⁰⁸ The enslaved men provided only minimal information, “insufficient to satisfy the people of their guilt.”

²⁰⁷ Cited in John S. Bassett, *Slavery in the State of North Carolina* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1899), pp. 23-24.

²⁰⁸ At this time, the citizenry assumed that the threat was rooted solely in the slave community, thus shielding slaveholders such as Blake and Johnson from suspicion. As the investigation continued and the perceived scope of the plot expanded, Blake and Johnson subsequently came to be implicated along with their slaves, Blake being among the white men hanged in the coming weeks.

However, authorities held them over in prison for further examination.²⁰⁹

Following this short-lived reprieve, on July 2nd, a growing number of townspeople despite having no new information became convinced of these two slaves' guilt. The townspeople subsequently "seized and hung them without further ceremony."²¹⁰

Revelations continue as one Jesse Mabry, implicated a slave referred to as "Joe, the Blacksmith." Mabry states that after being informed of the threats Mrs. Latham overheard, white people of Beattie's Bluff requested that Mabry examine two of Latham's "house girls." Mabry contends that the two women confirmed "in unqualified terms" that a male slave of the Landfair plantation had, "informed them that the negroes intended rising and slaying all the whites."²¹¹ This initial "confession" aimed suspicion at Joe the blacksmith, along with another slave named Weaver owned by one Sansberry. Joe's status as a blacksmith and his ability to interact freely with all aspects of Mississippi's slave society, raised suspicion as to his involvement in the plot. Weaver was a slave preacher, hence he represented

²⁰⁹ Letter to the Charleston Carrier from Tyger Bayou, Madison County, Mississippi. Republished in the Liberator, Boston: August 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136.

²¹⁰ Ibid

²¹¹ Mabry Letter, September 1835.

yet another group of slaves often suspected of involvement during periods of unrest.²¹²

Ultimately, Mabry and his cohort also obtained concessions from Joe the blacksmith, who stated that, “he knew what they wanted, and would tell the whole, but that he himself had nothing to do with the business.”²¹³ Up to this point, whites in the area believed that a threat existed solely at the hands of enslaved men and women. Much of the information obtained from Joe supported their initial fears. According Joe, Sam, Mabry’s slave who Mabry considered to be “a great scoundrel” was among the “ringleaders in the business.” Joe also named two other “ringleaders: “Sansberry’s preacher, Weaver, and “one belonging to Mr. Riley, by the name of Russell, (a preacher as well).”²¹⁴ In many ways’ these confessions suggest that Joe, indeed “knew what they wanted” and chose to give them what they wanted. Each of the men named as a conspirator were already under the veil of

²¹² For images of the role of religion in the rebelliousness of Nat Turner, for example, see Stephen F. Oates, The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner’s Fierce Rebellion (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), Scot French, The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory. (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 2004). Differing from the revolutionary view of slave religion, Eugene Genovese emphasized what he viewed as a slave focus on the “goodness” of living. See Eugene Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 159-184. In the years following the uprising, Israel Campbell (the focus of discussion in the previous chapter) also became a preacher. He writes of the freedom of movement that he exercised in this role, as well as the role that religion played in his desire for freedom at various points of his narrative, even questioning his loyalties as a slave by stating that religion first caused him to question, “shall I obey my heavenly father or my master.” Israel Campbell, Bond and Free, p. 107.

²¹³ Mabry Letter, September 1835

²¹⁴ Ibid

suspicion to the inquisitors, and most likely the questioners raised each of these men as suspects during their examination of Joe, the blacksmith.

Significantly also, Joe's confession ultimately helped to bring about an expansion of the insurrectionary fears. In naming these slaves as "ringleaders" in the suspected conspiracy, Joe also claimed that each of these men ultimately served as "Captains" under the leadership of a number of white men. According to Joe:

...the insurrection was to commence on the 4th of July; that each plantation of slaves were to commence with axes, hoes, &c, and to massacre all the whites at home and were then to make their way to Beatie Bluff, where they were to break into the store houses, and get all the arms and ammunition that was at that place, and then to proceed to Livingston, where they would obtain reinforcements from the different plantations; and from there they were to go to Vernon and sack that place, recruiting as they went; and from there proceed to Clinton' and by the time that they took the last mentioned place they calculated that they would be strong enough to bare down any and every opposition that could be brought against them, from there to Natchez; and that after killing all the citizens of that place, and plundering the banks, &c., there were to retire to a place called the Devil's Punch Bowl—here they were to make a stand, and that no force that could be brought could injure them, &c.²¹⁵

Despite discussion of white involvement with the uprising, at this point the focus remained on those slaves thought to be involved. Sansberry and his overseer proceeded to question Weaver who denied any knowledge of a conspiracy. Even upon being "put under the lash," Weaver denied the

²¹⁵ Ibid

charges Joe levied against him and refused to confess his involvement. Consequently, “Joe was set at liberty, and Weaver remained in confinement.”²¹⁶ Sansberry likewise questioned Russell who, like Weaver denied knowledge or involvement in the unrest. According to Mabry, “Mr. Lee, at this time struck him twice; Russell asked him to wait, and that he would tell him all about the business; he then went on to make a full statement of all he knew. His statement was, in all particulars, precisely like the one made by Joe.”²¹⁷

This pattern of investigation continued. According to Mabry,

“Next day we again met at the Bluff; a number of slaves were brought in; among the rest, one belonging to Mr. Saunders, by the name of Jim, a very sensible looking fellow. I was appointed to examine him; he would not, for some time, make any confession, but at length agreed that *if I would not punish him any more* [italics mine] that he would make a full confession, and proceeded to do so. His statement was very much like that of Joe’s; implicating, however, more white men by name than Joe had done, and some more slaves.”²¹⁸

Mabry further states that:

“he also pointed out a [white] man by the name of Moss, and his son, as being very friendly to the slaves; that to him they could sell all that they could lay their hands on; that he always furnished them with whiskey, and, also, that these bad white men, while in the neighborhood, always made Moss’s house their home; but that he did not know whether he, Moss, intended to take any part with them in their intended insurrection.”²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Ibid

²¹⁷ Ibid

²¹⁸ Ibid

²¹⁹ Ibid

Despite not directly implicating Moss and his son in the conspiracy, Jim's inclusion of these two men fits precisely in the fears local whites held towards other whites that interacted too freely with enslaved men and women.

Just as the people of Vicksburg feared the lack of institutional control associated with gamblers and horse thieves who freely moved among the enslaved, the people in and around Livingston likewise held distrust towards men such as the Mosses involved in similar types of interactions. Once the threat of white involvement entered into the fear of a slave insurrection, men such as Moss and steam doctors such as Cotton and Saunders quickly became focal points of the investigations.

Mabry concludes his recollections of the initial questioning by stating that, "After getting through with the examinations, Jim, Bachus, Weaver, Russell, and Sam, were all put to death by hanging."²²⁰ Joe, the blacksmith ultimately was the only man who escaped this "examination" process without being sent to the gallows. A later article from the Charleston Carrier mentions a blacksmith who "was entirely acquitted, and his service as a blacksmith held in requisition. He seemed the happiest man on the hill, rendering every service required with the upmost promptness and

²²⁰ Ibid

cheerfulness.”²²¹ Joe’s willingness to give information, whether true or forced, ultimately spared his life.

These early hangings served a dual purpose: they were designed to punish those believed to be involved in the uprising, and the “confessions” awakened local whites to the seriousness of the threat surrounding them. The hangings “had the effect of arousing the citizens from their inaction, and of dispelling the illusion, and warning them of the awful reality of their precarious situation.”²²² The official report of these events argues that the people of Madison County had been enlightened to understand that this was not the work of a few disgruntled slaves, but rather, a much larger conspiracy. Furthermore, “wicked” white men, described as “highway robbers, murderers, and abolitionists” stood at the head of this planned conspiracy.²²³ These fears drove the subsequent investigations and responses. The questioning, threatening, and beating of these enslaved men serves as the first glimpse of the violence that ultimately exemplified the response to the suspected uprising. Enslaved victims had little reason to expect legal rights or protections. However, moving forward, several white men, many themselves slaveholders, were ultimately dealt with in a similar manner. White involvement was first mentioned in the process of

²²¹ “Horrible Details,” *Liberator*, August 22, p. 136.

²²² Shackelford, *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County*, p. 11.

²²³ *Ibid*, p. 12

investigating and hanging of the above-mentioned enslaved men. The possibility that the conspiracy might have been led and instigated by white agitators increased the white community's feeling of vulnerability, and they immediately formulated a more organized and official system of response. The townspeople's actions quickly coalesced in the following days. Though their suspicions were shrouded in uncertainty in terms of the size and scope of the potential unrest, they created a thirteen man investigating committee designed to ascertain the magnitude of the plot and to respond appropriately. The members of this committee came exclusively from the slaveholding class; they owned large parcels of land and numerous slaves.²²⁴ Though planters dominated positions on the committee, elite members of the community and non-slaveholding whites also shared control in shaping the group's actions. Thus, the actions of this committee cannot be separated from the will and interests of the larger community. In fact, the decision to form a committee of investigation as well as its membership resulted from the direct participation and votes of over one hundred and fifty

²²⁴ Auditor's Records from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History lists the members of the Livingston Committee of safety, along with their property and slave ownership for twelve of the thirteen men as follows: D. W. Haley, 320 acres and 17 slaves; James Grafton, 400 acres and 26 slaves; John Simmons, 1100 acres and 42 slaves; William Wade, 1042 acres and 42 slaves; Sack P. Gee, 320 acres and 8 slaves; Israel Spencer, acreage not listed, with 26 slaves; Thomas Hudnold, 2700 acres and 118 slaves; Charles Smith, 240 acres and 18 slaves; Robert Hodge, 560 acres and 9 slaves; H. D. Runnels, 844 acres and 33 slaves; Nelson L. Taylor, 160 acres and 20 slaves; M. D. Mitchell (Committee Chairman), 80 acres and 4 slaves. Information on the final member, James Mabry, is not listed. Auditor's Records, Series G., No. 82, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

townspeople.²²⁵ Significantly, none of the white men ultimately brought before the committee under suspicion of involvement in the uprising appear on the list of those involved in creating the committee of investigation.

Community members and those on the committee went to great lengths to establish their legitimacy and authority, which was clearly extralegal. With this in mind, the men selected for the committee were, according to one local editorial, “thirteen of the most respected citizens of the county, men of elevated standing in the community for moral worth, integrity, and discretion.”²²⁶ Selecting prominent citizens allowed invested

²²⁵ The following men are said to have voted for the selection of the members of the committee as well as signing the initial resolutions outlining its duties and responsibilities: Alford Halcut, Alexander Allen, George W. Amos, Robert G. Anderson, John G. Andrews, William H. Atkinson, Thomas Atwood, D. P. Austin, James Avery, Samuel Barrow, William Barrow, Edwin Bass, James F. Beasley, Albert Bennett, William Bennett, Elijah Boddie, William Bole, John Brisco, C. S. Brown, N. W. Bush, Joseph W. Camp, T. J. Catching, Robert T. Cecill, Edward Cheatham, Osmun Claiborne, Tolbert Clark, Joseph Clark, John S. Cock, Ramsey M. Cox, T. B. Daugherty, George Dixon, William G. Doyle, M. Delaney, L. Estill, S. W. Ewing, John Fletcher, G. Flint, Joseph A. Fort, William Frith, Jeff E. Gagdon, William Gartley, M. N. Gasy, Reuben I. Gee, Sack P. Gee, Gadi Gibson, John A. Gilbreath, James G. Goodhue, Garrett Goodloe, A. M. Goodloe, James Grafton, Charles B. Green, Guilford Griffin, T. C. Griffing, John R. Grigsby, D. W. Haley, W. E. Harrell, Ira Harris, Gill Harrison, W. D. F. Harrison, H. Hayneau, Albert Hendrick, W. B. Hendrick, James B. Hester, Henry Hines, Robert S. Hodge, Robert Hodge Sr., Joseph L. Holland, Littleton W. House, Thomas Hudnall Jr., Thomas Hudnall Sr., R. S. Hunter, Edwin R. Isler, T. P. Jones, James R. Jones, Eleazer Kilpatrick, Harry Latham, John N. Legrand, A. S. Leppingwell, John W. Lindsey, Cane Logan, John T. Long, John Lowe, Jesse Mabry, Daniel Mann, Hugh McElroy, S. C. McGilvary, Robert M. McGregor, D. McLean, H. M. Merreth, Wade H. Mills, Solomon S. Mitchell, M. D. Mitchell, Samuel Mosely, Stephen Old, John G. Ott, William Pack, James Patterson, Nathan Pequin, Hiram Perkins, Alfred Perry, Henry G. Pipkin, Joseph T. Pugh, Benjamin Pilliam, William S. Rayner, Pierson reading Sr., Isaac Rhodes, A. W. Robinson, John H. Rollins, William B. Ross, William Royce, Harding D. Runnels, Thornton Sandridge, Thomas Saunders, D. W. Saxton, Thomas Shackelford, S. D. Shackelford, Abner Sholan, H. H. Shrock, William Simmons, Samuel B. Simmons, John Simmons, John C. Smith, James M. Smith, Charles Smith, Israel Spencer, Charles L. Starr, Andrew C. Steger, William Steger, B. Strother, John Sturdy, Dempsey Taylor, Nelson L. Taylor, S. B. Thompson, George Trotter, Benjamin W. Wadlington, G. P. Wadlington, G. P. Wadlington, G. W. Walsting, N. Webb, William Wells, B. Wells, L. Wesley, N. S. White, William Wildy, Edward Wills, James T. Wilson, James S. Wood, James P. Wyatt, Duncan York. MDAH, Madison County, 1835 Uprising, Subject file. Charles Elon Bowering, Sr., Before the War in Madison County, p. 12.

²²⁶ MDAH, “The Horrible Conspiracy,” Clinton Mississippi Gazette, July 11, 1835

white Mississippians to cloak their extralegal actions with a façade of responding in compliance with accepted standards.

They also understood the need to demonstrate to outsiders that the extremity of their actions conformed to the extreme danger they faced. Thus, white Mississippians in and around Clinton constructed a narrative specifically designed to convince non-Mississippians that the local reactions to the perceived threat were warranted. Expressing this sentiment directly, in an early resolution the committee stated, “To those acquainted with the circumstances and condition of the surrounding country and population at the time, an apology for the strong measures adopted by the citizens, and the committee, under the authority confided them would be unnecessary; it may not be to those at a distance. The question may arise among the latter, why was not the civil authority appealed to?” The committee’s response to this question was that they believed an appeal to civil authority “is always greatly preferred, when its powers are competent to restrain the evil. [However] The civil authority was inadequate to this end in Madison County...which would have left many families defenseless; and it was unknown at what moment this protection would have been required; besides, immediate example, and its consequent *terror* [italics mine], without hope

from the law's delay or evasion, seemed, as in truth it was, indispensable to safety."²²⁷

This statement makes two significant points: first, the severity of the immediate threat in Madison County deemed the committee's actions justified and necessary, regardless of how extreme they might appear to those from afar; second, the statement acknowledged that brutality served to instill fear among others thinking of similar insurrectionary actions either at that time or in subsequent weeks or months.

The committee's actions as clearly stated, were nothing short of terrorism. Their goal was to use violence to create an overarching fear that would not only suppress the current threat, but curtail similar threats in times to come. What occurred in Mississippi during these days and weeks was not a series of individual responses to perceived individual threats, but an organized and calculated response under the leadership of "respectable citizens" to a perceived threat to the structured racial, social, and economic foundations of Mississippi's plantation society.

The committee quickly moved beyond a focus on its image to enacting several resolutions that directly outlined their goals, objectives, and nearly limitless levels of power. The townspeople in support of suppressing

²²⁷ Thomas Shackelford, The Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi at Livingston in July, 1835, In Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implemented in a Contemplated Insurrection in This State. (Jackson, Mississippi: Mayson and Smoot, 1836), p. 1.

the suspected plot understood that the prestige of the committee alone was not sufficient in providing the desired legitimacy for its actions. In order to buttress their legitimacy, as well as create a rationale for those actions yet to occur, its members and supporters produced numerous resolutions, writings, and proclamations. Through these measures, the committee reinforced their incalculable authority, extending even to decisions of life and death for blacks and whites throughout the county. It was not an abuse of power in their estimation, but rather an essential extension of the will of the citizenry at large.²²⁸

The first proclamation released by the Committee of Safety laid out the basic structure of the group along with the duties and powers resting within their purview. Accordingly, it would consist of thirteen “freeholders,” two of whom would serve as secretary and chairman. The secretary of the committee kept a record of the proceedings and preserved them.²²⁹ The committee was set to meet each day from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. until the threat was removed, after which point the committee would dissolve itself.²³⁰

²²⁸ Bowering, Before the War in Madison County, p. 12.

²²⁹ The notes taken by the secretary purportedly served as the basis for Thomas Shackelford’s Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, published a year following the activities of the committee and presented as the official record of the events from the perspective of the committee.

²³⁰ Bowering, Before the War in Madison County, p. 12.

The first proclamation also outlined the limits (or lack thereof) regarding the committee's power to investigate and punish those believed to be involved in the suspected uprising. Through structuring the organization of the committee, its members buttressed its power. Only committee members could appoint members to fill vacancies resulting from "death, resignation, or otherwise..." This took away the power of the broader citizenry to fill such vacancies through a vote, even though the community had established the committee. Once established however, committee members maintained total control over its makeup. In addition, the committee granted itself the power to call at its own discretion meetings of the citizens of the county.²³¹ Committee members also maintained the authority to appoint "captains" of various patrol companies that were sent out to bring in blacks and whites for questioning and investigation. Significantly, the committee had no limitations regarding who could be forced to appear. Likewise, through this initial proclamation, the committee defined the methods of examination, essentially condoning the use of torture under the rubric of investigation, punishment, and deterrence. The committee reserved the right to "try in any summary manner any person brought before them, with the power to hang or whip, being always

²³¹ Ibid

governed by the laws of the land so far only as they shall be applicable in the case in question, otherwise to act as in their discretion shall seem best for the benefit of the country, and for the protection of the citizens.”²³² As this section suggests, the committee asserted that it held the authority to determine when and where the constraints of the “laws of the land” began and ended.

When, in their opinion, the interests of the local citizenry was best served by disregarding national or state legal practices, the committee clearly stated that they were willing and justified in doing so. The committee members concluded this initial proclamation by offering protection to themselves and to those who worked on their behalf. Knowing that their actions would be extralegal, they essentially asserted their right to blanket immunity. One hundred and fifty local community members supported them and pledge themselves to “...sustain said committee against all personal and pecuniary liability which may result from the discharge of the duties hereby assigned them. And further, that we will in like manner sustain all persons in the discharge of the duties which may be from time to time assigned them

²³² Ibid

by said committee; and that we are not responsible for any acts done by persons acting without the orders of the committee.”²³³

Rather than giving the impression that the committee sought to work outside the law, this resolution reframed or reshaped the community’s perceptions of legality. In essence, these committee members became “the law.” They sought to exempt themselves and their representatives from punishment for any excesses that occurred in the course of their investigations and responses while simultaneously criticizing those not associated with the committee who might respond in a similar manner. Subsequent writings, either by the committee itself or those supporting their actions, further expanded on their right and, perhaps more importantly, their perceived duty to act in such a manner.

The committee’s initial resolution was not the only effort made at defining its role in reacting to the suspected plot. A two-tiered response evolved whereby the local citizenry attacked the character of those suspected of inciting unrest while simultaneously accentuating their own sense of personal moral superiority. Just as it was essential to characterize “questionable” whites and suspicious slaves in clear, menacing and often exaggerated forms, so too did it remain necessary to create a particularly

²³³ Ibid

positive image of those engaged in responding to the perceived threat.²³⁴

The fact that a substantial belief that an insurrection threat existed, served as only one portion of the justification for the rapid and often violent response. More importantly, stories focusing on the character of the suspected insurrectionists, both black and white began to emerge which served to accentuate the community's sense of desperation. Local citizens developed a scenario whereby an imminent threat existed, not due to the abuses or inequities of slavery, but rather as a result of the presence of numerous immoral men for whom violence and disruption was the norm.

Despite assertions over time of multiple justifications for the actions of the committee and townspeople in general, the core motivating principle remained that of self-defense. In order for such a justification to remain plausible, the threat had to be viewed as imminent, clear, and overwhelming. Additionally, the men suspected of involvement had to be presented as representative of a threat that could not be sufficiently addressed through traditional methods of law and order. These sentiments can be seen in Shackelford's official record of the committee's proceedings as it states that, "When, too, it is recollected that all we hold most dear in this world was

²³⁴ This was not unlike the reaction in Vicksburg to the gambling threat discussed previously. The imagery of the gamblers, coupled with the innocence of the local citizens provided the essential first step in justifying the community's outrage and ensuing brutality. James Lal Penick, Jr. The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History. (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1981).

involved in common danger...No one need be informed that the principle of self-defence is the first law of nature, derived from our Creator as essential to the preservation of life.”²³⁵

Likewise, in a letter to Governor Runnels in the midst of their response, the committee asserted that its purpose was to provide the community with “its self defence in the midst of actual insurgencies and for the suppression of irregular and precipitate movements resulting from extreme excitement and the protection of suspected persons until the just and (?) of their guilt.”²³⁶ These men believed that their very lives, and the lives of their families and communities depended on a swift and brutal response to this ominous threat. In an editorial written in the Clinton (Mississippi) Gazette, the writer closed his description of the proposed uprising with a similar emphasis upon the severity of the threat. In his view only a clear focus on the threat by the entire community could guarantee their ability to “ensure our perfect safety and utterly defeat this abominable project; but inaction and apathy may be productive of consequences which we do not dare to name.”²³⁷ As they began to explain their reactions to this threat,

²³⁵ Thomas Shackelford, The Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi at Livingston in July, 1835, In Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implemented in a Contemplated Insurrection in This State. (Jackson, Mississippi: Mayson and Smoot, 1835), p. 1.

²³⁶ Letter from the Committee of Safety in Clinton, Mississippi to Governor Runnels dated July 11, 1835. MDAH John A. Murrell Folder, clippings.

²³⁷ “The Horrible Conspiracy,” Clinton (Miss) Gazette. July 11, 1835.

however, it was not enough to simply focus on the severity of the crime being contemplated (insurrection), but simultaneously it became necessary to emphasize the essential evil nature of the individuals engaged in this plot.

It is important to recognize, as previously discussed, that initially the citizenry believed the threat to consist of actions conspired and designed to be carried out by enslaved people alone. It was not until the committee began to interrogate and “investigate” suspected enslaved men and women that suspicions as to the presence of white co-conspirators began to emerge. White citizens were under no illusions as to the volatile threat that their enslaved population posed; and their descriptions of those who they believed most willing and likely to take part in such a venture makes their fears and concerns clear. Whites first chose to bring in those men and women whites viewed as most threatening or suspicious; whether due to their positions in the slave community (slave preachers, for instance) or due to perceived “flaws” in their character.²³⁸ When the gaze turned to white men suspected of involvement in the unrest, investigators made similar assumptions in terms of perceived “flaws” in their character as well.

As the investigation continued following the execution of the group of enslaved men originally convicted, similar patterns of inquiry and abuse

²³⁸ See, for example, Mabry Letter, September 1835.

involving blacks and whites continued. A flurry of activity persisted outside the committee's control among men throughout the community. These white self-professed "regulators" worked for the white citizenry while simultaneously aiding in the execution of the committee's interests. William H. Thomson demonstrates this connection in a letter dated July 12th that describes activities during the first days of July. According to Thomson, "every negro they meet who does not give a good account of himself they take up or shoot down. The laws have been superseded by regulators, who have a summary mode of administering justice in these cases." He continues, "When a negro or white man is suspected of being in any way connected with the plot, they arrest him, appoint a jury, examine witnesses, render the verdict, pass sentence and execute – all upon the spot, barely giving the culprit time to commend himself to the Throne of Mercy."²³⁹

The activities of such regulators, however was not at odds with the committee. Local whites made every effort to reassert control over their enslaved population. Such efforts necessitated limiting their movement and ability to congregate and plan (or implement) unrest. In an effort to accomplish these means, the committee accepted volunteers and formed patrols to monitor the actions and movement of their slaves. An excerpt

²³⁹ MDAH, "John A. Murrell Clippings," Letter from Dr. William H. Thomson to his wife, July 12th, 1835 from Hinds County, Mississippi.

from an anonymous letter written in Canton, Mississippi on July 3rd describes the author's involvement on such a patrol. He recalls the committee sending him, "to ride about the country to the plantations, to see if every Negro was at his home."²⁴⁰

These patrollers brought in slaves for examination before the committee if they were found away from their homes. The author's description of the slaves' leaves no doubt as to the depths of white fears. The "whole country is in alarm," he maintained. "Volunteers are forming a company for defense, and we are prepared with guns and ammunition." He then describes the punishment exerted upon a slave brought in to Livingston. "They gave a Negro six hundred lashes, before he would discover anything, then he informed them that the blacks were to rise on the 4th of July."²⁴¹

This scenario once again depicts the familiar pattern of excessive abuse which was followed by alleged confessions as was previously seen in the questioning of Joe, the blacksmith, Weaver, and other enslaved men. The confessions ultimately fit the emerging narrative of an ever-expanding conspiracy, while examiners failed to question the veracity of these forced admissions.

²⁴⁰ Liberator (1831-1865). Boston: August 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 124. [From the Philadelphia Gazette, "TROUBLE AT THE SOUTH." Extract from letter dated Canton, Mississippi. July 3, 1835].

²⁴¹ Ibid

In concluding his letter, the writer exposes the rampant violence associated with this stage of the response: “They hanged two Negroes yesterday at Livingston, and they have about fifteen more that they are going to hang. We had four more brought in this morning to examine, and expect they will hang every one of them. The court has adjourned. They tried three blacks and flogged them all. To one of them they gave 200 lashes.”²⁴²

Such violence was not isolated during this period of inquiry. Two separate newspaper articles referenced the treatment of a 72 year-old slave named Gregory.²⁴³ Following its investigation, the committee ordered that Gregory be whipped and “banished perpetually from the state, to depart in 48 hours.”²⁴⁴ Similarly, “Terrell, about 60, received 150 lashes, and to leave the state in 48 hours,”²⁴⁵ and “Ferry, 50 years of age, was also found guilty, and sentenced like Gregory, but to receive 150 lashes.”²⁴⁶ An article in the Charleston Carrier defined the actions above as “slicking,” an act “performed in the following manner: The prisoner is stripped naked, and laid on his belly, his hands and his feet fastened to four pegs, when with a coleman he receives the stripe from different hands. The younger was

²⁴² Ibid

²⁴³ “Horrible Details,” *Liberator* (1831-1865) Boston: Aug. 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136 (from the Charleston Carrier and MDAH, “Transactions in Mississippi.” Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

²⁴⁴ “Transactions in Mississippi. Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

²⁴⁵ “Horrible Details,” *Liberator* (1831-1865) Boston: Aug. 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136.

²⁴⁶ “Transactions in Mississippi. Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

slicked with a vengeance – his back was literally flayed.”²⁴⁷ The committee and its representatives sought to end the threat through terrorizing those they believed might be associated with its implementation. The beating of old men like Gregory, Terrell and Ferry served the purpose as recounted in the committee proclamation, of demonstrating to the broader slave population the risks involved with even being suspected of plotting insurrection.

The actions above run counter to the professed purpose and desires of the Committee of Safety. An article reprinted on August 8th, 1835 in the Nile’s Register from the Clinton Gazette emphasized how local whites viewed the role of the committee. Whites justified the actions of the committee, but further suggested that the committee’s activities served the role of issuing justice towards the guilty while simultaneously protecting the innocent during a period of potential chaos and unrest. In presenting the members as measured and calm, the article describes how, “The committee of investigation occupy a room withdrawn from the multitude, and the utmost calmness and dignity have marked their proceedings. The investigations which have taken place as the various cases are brought before them for consideration, are conducted in a manner that would not do discredit to the most dignified judicial tribunal of the country.”

²⁴⁷ “Horrible Details,” *Liberator* (1831-1865) Boston: Aug. 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136.

As the description continues, the article emphasizes that, “Every opportunity is furnished to the person inculpated, of cross examining witnesses, introducing testimony in their defence, and explaining all doubtful points on their own voluntary statements, which the most humane could desire; and, what is truly creditable, not a word of unkindness is permitted to be addressed to the culprit on trial, and no question propounded to any of the witnesses calculated to produce a statement of the case not entirely in accordance with truth and justice.”²⁴⁸

The committee’s initial resolution following its formation laid the foundation for such a view. In the address, the committee acknowledges that its creation resulted from “imminent and pressing” dangers. However, the committee also stressed its efforts to avoid rash, unjust actions in favor of a more deliberate and measured response. The committee understood that as fears and tensions increased among whites, the severity of their actions would likely increase as well. The committee, thusly formed, presented itself as a buffer against rash responses, proclaiming their purpose to be, “not only to break the force of the coming storm, but to shield the innocent from being confounded with the guilty.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ MDAH “Affairs in Mississippi,” Niles’ Register, August 8, 1835, p. 403-405 From the Clinton (Miss.) Gazette.

²⁴⁹ Shackleford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi. p. 1.

Further expressing their desire to pursue justice along with the protection of the innocent, the statement continues, “If the committee have in any instance erred, in consigning the innocent to death, of which they remain yet to be convinced, it has not been produced by precipitation on their part – for due deliberation and an earnest desire to find out the truth, rather than the guilt of the accused has been affected by the length of time devoted to the examination of each case.”²⁵⁰ Committee members thusly openly expressed their desire and, more importantly, their capacity to mete out justice *and* protect the innocent from a potentially deadly mob mentality.

Whether or not the committee truly had a desire to protect the innocent from the abuses of the masses is at best debatable. What is clear, however, is their presence did little to mitigate the actions of the broader community. The investigation and punishment of a mulatto slave belonging to Robert Bell, named Vincent, clearly demonstrates the committee’s inability or unwillingness to live up to such a pledge. As Vincent came under suspicion of involvement in the plot, he was brought in before the committee for investigation. Following questioning, the committee found Vincent’s knowledge and involvement worthy receiving “three hundred lashes and...perpetual banishment from the United States, after the

²⁵⁰ Ibid

expiration of forty days.”²⁵¹ Unlike others brought in for questioning, the committee determined that Vincent should escape with his life.

While the committee did not believe that Vincent’s actions warranted execution, the events that followed demonstrate the committee’s inability or lack of desire to counter the will of the broader community. Following Vincent’s sentencing, a number of Clinton residents gathered in opposition to the committee’s ruling, believing his crimes worthy of hanging. Those assembled to witness the beating conducted a vote to determine Vincent’s fate. The results determined that “the hanging party had it by an ‘overwhelming majority,’”²⁵² and Vincent was taken back to prison in preparation for his hanging the following day. An even larger crowd arrived the next day to witness the hanging. After a second vote validated the decision of the previous day, Vincent “was led to a ‘black Jack,’ and suspended from one of its branches.”²⁵³

In Vincent’s case, the will of the mob clearly superseded that of the committee. One description of the incident expressed a belief that the townspeople were fully justified: “We approve entirely of this proceeding. The people have acted properly. Any man, whether he be white, yellow, or

²⁵¹ “Lynch Law,” *Liberator* (1831-1865). Boston: Aug. 15, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 33; p. 130.

²⁵² Ibid

²⁵³ Ibid

black, who lends his countenance and aid to a scheme having for its object the burning of villages and towns, and the indiscriminate butchery of men, women, and children, surely deserves an ignominious death.”²⁵⁴

Accordingly, not only were the townspeople’s actions justified, but, in this scenario white citizens were the true victims in the course of events. In their view, the hanging of Vincent resulted from a reaction to a “deep laid conspiracy against the lives of an unoffending community.”²⁵⁵

Vincent approached the gallows in silence, and thereby continued to antagonize his assailants. They lamented that “Vincent could have made important disclosures at the gallows, but obstinately refused to do so.” Reportedly, he alleged “that his own death being certain, it would profit him nothing to bring others to the same fate, and that he should not inform on anyone.”²⁵⁶

In considering the case of Vincent in relation to other hangings occurring throughout the period of inquest, perhaps the true purpose of his execution was to elicit a confession and implicate other suspected “conspirators.” In any case, clearly the committee’s powers were superseded when they ran counter to the will of the mob during this threat in Mississippi.

²⁵⁴ Ibid

²⁵⁵ Ibid

²⁵⁶ Ibid

In the first days of July, following the executions of as many as a dozen slaves, slaveholders began to gradually believe that whites were intricately involved in the unrest. Mabry's letter describing the inquisition of Joe, the blacksmith mentioned whites conspirators as a part of Joe's confession. Joe, and a slave named Jim (among the first enslaved men hanged), both named white men as the head of the conspiracy, including Ruel Blake, Joshua Cotton, and William Saunders.²⁵⁷ Despite such assertions, days passed before the whites mentioned were brought in for questioning.

William P. Johnson, a planter in Madison County, charged his driver, "a negro man, in whom he had confidence," with infiltrating the slave community on his plantation in order to determine if any were involved with the conspiracy.²⁵⁸ The slave driver related that one of Johnson's older male slaves (unnamed) claimed that there was to be a "rising of the blacks soon."²⁵⁹ The driver was unable to ascertain when the uprising was to take place, however the elderly slave implicated a slave belonging to Ruel Blake, named Peter. Peter was allegedly planning to "break open the store of Wm. M. Ryee and steal some kegs of Powder."²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ Mabry Letter, September 1835.

²⁵⁸ Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, p. 6.

²⁵⁹ Ibid

²⁶⁰ Ibid

Johnson turned over the elderly unnamed slave to the committee that they might “use (him) as they might deem proper.”²⁶¹ The old man refused to confess and denied having a conversation with the driver. However, as happened in other queries, “upon receiving a most severe chastisement,” the old man “confessed all he knew respecting the statement of a contemplated insurrection.”²⁶² A second source goes further, which leads to revelations about whites. When, after “severe chastisement,” the unnamed old man denied knowledge of the uprising, “a lynch mob decided he should be hanged. With a rope around his neck he said that Ruel Blake was one of the white men behind the movement.”²⁶³ The assembled mob hanged Johnson’s elderly slave, and “Blake’s boy, Peter” became the next focal point of investigation.

Niles’ Register described Blake as “occupied as a cotton gin maker, wheelwright, and carpenter; was remarkable for industry and perseverance, by which he had accumulated some property [and] vested in 4 or 5 Negroes.”²⁶⁴ This is in contrast to Mabry and Johnson who owned substantial plantations and a number of slaves. Significantly, Blake was not among the 150 men who formed the committee or the selection of its initial

²⁶¹ Ibid, 7

²⁶² Ibid

²⁶³ Bowering, Before the War in Madison County, p. 21.

²⁶⁴ “Transactions in Mississippi.” Niles’ Register. October 17, 1835.

members.²⁶⁵ This represents another common thread running through the summer's events. Despite the fact that many owned land and slaves in the community, none of the white men implicated in Shackelford's account of the investigation were among those voting for the formation of the committee. It is possible that these men already existed on the edges of the "community" despite their status, and thus were already viewed as suspicious as the investigations began. Information obtained through the torture of enslaved men certainly reflected the sentiments of the broader community. Consequently, the names of men like Blake were more likely to be repeated in these inquiries.

The committee began its questioning of Blake's slave, Peter, with no expressed suspicion as to Blake's involvement. However, the committee's report produced following the unrest portrays Blake as unworthy of trust. According to the report, Blake who had lived in Madison County for two or three years had few friends among the local residents.²⁶⁶ "He kept himself almost aloof from white society, oftener seen among the Negroes. His

²⁶⁵ Bowering, *Before the War in Madison County*, p. 12.

²⁶⁶ "Trial of Ruel Blake." Shackelford, *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County*. Other sources suggest that Blake had lived in Madison County for 6 years prior to the unrest. See "Transactions in Mississippi." *Niles' Register*. October 17, 1835.

character, as known to the citizens, was one of the darkest die. He was noted for cold-blooded revenge, insatiable avarice, and unnatural cruelty.”²⁶⁷

Blake’s personae, in retrospect, differed very little from the images Vicksburg’s citizens created regarding the gamblers around this same time.²⁶⁸ Like gamblers and other loose society members men such as Blake, slaveholder or not, blurred the lines of race and slavery and failed to follow the acceptable customs and mores of respectable Mississippi. He was portrayed vindictively and being of low character, the sort of white man most likely to engage in cavorting outside of propriety. In creating images portraying Blake as worthy of suspicion, the committee and well-connected citizenry of Madison County chameleon-like, shifted their definitions of inclusion and exclusion by convincing themselves that whatever actions they took benefited order and the existing commonweal.

Blake presented Peter before the committee for investigation. Peter denied any knowledge of the suspected plot. Committee members presumed Peter’s guilt, and, believing his owner would be most effective in persuading him to talk, requested that Blake question his slave to get the desired information for the committee. Blake’s actions, however, ultimately raised

²⁶⁷ “Trial of Ruel Blake.” Shackelford, *Proceedings of Madison County*.

²⁶⁸ Citizens made similar descriptions of gamblers in Vicksburg. See MDAH, “Gamblers in the West,” *Niles’ Register*, Aug. 8, 1835, p. 402; “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law,” *The American Whig Review* (1850-1852); March 1851; 7,3. P. 213; and James L. Penick, Jr., *The Great Western Land Pirate*, p. 1.

suspicious as to his involvement, and ultimately to the involvement of other whites as well, rather than answering questions as to Peter's involvement in the suspected plot.

Blake did as the committee requested, but he clearly lacked the vigor investigators expected from a slaveholder. Before he commenced whipping his slave, "Blake informed his Negro...what it was for, and requested him to tell all he knew about it." Peter once again denied any knowledge, and Blake proceeded to whip him. The description of what followed quickly drew the ire of many whites in attendance.

"Blake commenced whipping him, but in such a manner as to convince everyone present that he did not wish to hurt him, occasionally striking a hard lick to keep up appearances. The citizens found that Blake would never get anything out of him, believing that his presence acted as a restraint on the boy, they politely requested that Blake withdraw from where his boy was, and let them try. Blake remained in the area, listening anxiously, until the boy began to talk, at which time Blake lunged forward "and swore if he was touched another lick they would have to whip him first."²⁶⁹

A small scuffle broke out in consequence of these events. Blake eventually ran off, being told that the man he insulted would certainly kill him should he be caught.

At this point, even as the townspeople ran Blake away from the scene, they still did not connect his actions with any potential involvement in the

²⁶⁹ "Trial of Ruel Blake." Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

suspected conspiracy. He was a slaveholder; whites failed to associate his actions with complicity with slaves. As Shackelford writes, “Blake being a slave-holder no one at the time supposed, or had the most distant idea, that he was connected with the conspiracy, but attributed his conduct to sympathy for his negro.”²⁷⁰

This presumption rapidly changed as Blake fled the scene. As the committee members continued whipping Peter and questioning him as to his knowledge of the suspected plot, Peter responded by stating, “If you are whipping me to make me tell what my master told me, you may whip on till I die, for I promised him I would never tell.”²⁷¹ The townspeople no longer doubted Blake’s involvement and made efforts to arrest him and bring him before the committee. Blake escaped to Vicksburg and Natchez before returning to Vicksburg, “where at the time he was passing himself off as an Indiana boatman” with a “five hundred dollar reward being offered for him.”²⁷² It was not until July 8th, six days later, that Blake was captured and returned to Livingston to face the committee.

In the ensuing days, the committee and representative whites began taking the threat of white involvement more seriously. The committee began targeting whites of *suspicious character*, whites with unfettered

²⁷⁰ Ibid

²⁷¹ Ibid

²⁷² Ibid

access to the enslaved population, as well as those directly named by tortured slaves. Men known to “hang out in negro cabins” or to trade with slaves were especially suspect.²⁷³ Any unmonitored interaction with slaves was considered suspicious.

The groundswell expanded under such descriptions. One account reveals the breadth of suspicious characters, “Since the alarm of an impending insurrection, well grounded suspicion has rested on many white men, as instigators and originators of the plot, and the gamblers, itinerate preachers, steam doctors, and clock peddlers, were generally considered the guilty leaders.”²⁷⁴ Such men possessed the ability to move freely throughout the county, and were not tied directly to the community. This pattern directly parallels the events in Vicksburg.

In perhaps the most poignant description by locals that expresses their views of suspicious whites comes from an article first published in the Columbus (Miss.) Press newspaper:

“A more diabolical attempt –a deeper laid scheme of villainy, was never brought to light. And what adds to its atrociousness, and to the deep felt indignation with which we must contemplate it, is the fact that *white* men were at the head of it. Individuals enjoying all the privileges of free citizens, have, with a fiend like madness, instigated the ignorant and generally contented African, to rise against their fellow citizens, and to engage in an indiscriminate butchery of every age and sex? Language fails to express

²⁷³ Bowering, Before the War in Madison County, p. 22.

²⁷⁴ “More News from Madison, Hinds, and Warren.” Liberator; August 8, 1835; 5,32, p. 126.

the indignation, the horror, with which we look upon such fiends, for men they can hardly be called, they must be devoid of all the common attributes of human nature.”²⁷⁵

The passage demonstrates the disdain prominent local whites felt towards blacks and whites engaged in the plot, yet acknowledged that the denial of “free privileges of free citizens” might lead *misguided* blacks to such a plot. But they are astonished that those sharing white privilege would engage in slave unrest. Madison County whites tacitly acknowledged that enslaved people, similarly deprived, would aspire for freedom and consequently lay in wait for the opportunity to revolt. This speaks, once again, to the explainable paranoia of whites in Mississippi that often led to their excessive and brutal responses.

As the community and the committee expanded its net of suspects to include whites, and hence the need for an increased vigilance, they simultaneously expanded their appeal to stretch authority beyond its local borders, and in excess of state and federal law.²⁷⁶ Moreover, during that July of 1835, the people of Madison County and surrounding areas sought, and received the full sanction and support of the State.

²⁷⁵ “Affairs in Mississippi.” *Niles’ Register*, August 8, 1835, p. 403-405.

²⁷⁶ See, for example, the committee’s resolution proclaiming the right to “supersede the laws of the land” should conditions demand such actions. MDAH “Gamblers in the West” *Niles’ Register*, August 8, 1835, p. 402.

Governor Hiram Runnels made clear his commitment to the defense of whites in Hinds and Madison Counties through a combination of private correspondence and public proclamations. We have no record of what the initial letter from the committee of safety to the governor entailed. However, Governor Runnels' response provides a great deal of insight. His July 8th letter opens with an apology to the committee for not responding sooner. "I regret extremely that in consequence of my absence, you were not furnished the arms desired by you for the protection of the citizens of Madison County."²⁷⁷ This letter, coming six days after the increased suspicion of white involvement suggests that the committee wrote its appeal to the governor shortly after Peter's "confessions" and suspicions about Blake arose. Runnels' response also demonstrates that the committee sought material support and sanction of its actions from the state. For his part, Runnels accepts the view that a "deep-laid conspiracy for the destruction" of their community existed, and pledges to "cause a portion of the arms at this place to be forwarded to you, and, if required you will please send for them."²⁷⁸

Three days later, on July 11th, the committee accepted the governor's offer of help. The committee's letter upheld its belief in the severity of the

²⁷⁷ MDAH. Letter from Governor Hiram Runnels to the Committee of Safety, July 8th, 1835. Reprinted in Bowering, Before the War in Madison County.

²⁷⁸ Ibid

threat and in the level of support required to meet it. They expressed the “expediency and absolute necessity of detachments of militia... and for the protection of the citizens generally and for searching the woods swamps and other places in order that all persons supposed to be concerned in the insurrectionary movements now in agitation.”²⁷⁹ The committee also asked Governor Runnels to “call out sixty men to be put under military regulation for the protection of that town [Clinton] and its vicinity & to be kept under arms so long as necessity may require – also to furnish them with arms and ammunition for the service.”²⁸⁰

Governor Runnels’ compliance reveals his willingness to use all resources at his disposal to put down the perceived threat. In a July 13th public proclamation, Runnels puts the state in readiness for an imminent insurrectionary threat. Runnels proclaimed:

“that there is a band of lawless, base, villainous white men traversing the country, endeavoring to get up an insurrection among our slaves: And whereas, it has been further represented to the executive, that disclosures have been made by those concerned, well calculated to excite the most serious apprehensions that a widely extended conspiracy is on foot, calculated to produce an alarm, and call forth the vigilance and energy of our people”²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ MDAH, John Murrell Clippings Folder, Letter from Committee of Safety of Clinton and Hinds County to Governor Hiram Runnels, July 11, 1835.

²⁸⁰ Ibid

²⁸¹ Ibid

Runnels urged white citizens to turn in all suspected conspirators to the “proper authorities.” He further directs the State to prepare to provide arms and munitions to the local citizens if necessary for the execution of their own defense.²⁸² Runnels expressed his belief that it was of great, “importance and necessity” that citizens demonstrate “vigilance in all quarters of the state” in response to what he viewed as a severe threat.

As the committee continued to buttress its links to the Governor and the state, local investigations of whites suspected of involvement escalated. Two steam doctors, Joshua Cotton and William Saunders, became the first white men hanged in connection to the suspected insurrection. The committee had Cotton arrested on July 1st. They questioned and then released him due to a lack of evidence of his involvement in the suspected uprising. The following day, following the questioning of Blake’s slave, Peter, suspicions continued to rise and this time the committee brought both Cotton and Saunders in for further questioning.²⁸³

Their status as steam doctors, and the freedom of movement associated with such an occupation, placed both men under suspicion. Shackelford, in his trial records for the committee, maintains that Cotton drew attention primarily because of his interactions with slaves. Cotton, “A

²⁸² Governor’s Proclamation of July 13 1835, reprinted in “Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law,” The American Whig Review (1850-1852); March 1851; 7, 3. p. 213.

²⁸³ “Trial of Dr. Joshua Cotton,” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County

New Englander by way of Tennessee,” moved to Mississippi approximately a year prior to the suspected uprising. In the views of many, he thus remained an “outsider.”²⁸⁴ Shackelford reports that William Saunders gave testimony suggesting that Cotton moved freely among the enslaved community and would “buy anything they would steal and bring to him” and that Cotton may have also been involved in the stealing of John Slater’s slaves along with Boyd (who was later found to have been guilty of these thefts).²⁸⁵ This second charge, that of Cotton’s suspected involvement in slave stealing, accentuated his menacing image as a threat to the slave society.

Saunders provides no details about Cotton’s involvement in slave stealing, stating simply that, “Cotton and Boyd (who was supposed to be Cotton’s brother) and some others, had been extensively engaged in negro stealing.” He did, however, discuss how Cotton allegedly used horse stealing as a method of interacting freely with enslaved men and women:

Cotton had contracted to purchase from a gentleman, in the neighborhood of Livingston, a number of Spanish horses, but that he had never completed the purchase; but had always claimed them as his, and turned them loose into the country, as a pretext for hunting them, that he might have the opportunities to converse with the negroes; and, by that means, seduced them from allegiance to their owners, by instilling rebellious notions among them, and to form plans,

²⁸⁴ Ibid

²⁸⁵ Ibid

and to make converts to his propositions, which he could not do by being a Steam Doctor.²⁸⁶

Here we note that this description of Cotton's activities fits the characteristics that whites attributed to the gamblers who were viewed as such a threat by the citizens of Vicksburg. Cotton is perceived as conniving and devious, but more importantly, as one who uses deceptiveness as a tool in order to engage with enslaved men and women with the purpose of inciting them to rebel.²⁸⁷

This characterization of Cotton is buttressed by the testimony of an unnamed slave who claimed that Cotton (whom he could not identify by name) attempted to convince him to take part in an uprising:

"One day while hunting horses in the prairie, the man (later pointed out as Cotton), he said, told him he was hunting horses likewise, and soon began to question him respecting his master, if he was a bad man? Whether they, the negroes, were whipped much? And asked how much he would like to be free? And told him his plan for liberating the negroes, &c.,"²⁸⁸

The slave admitted to not being able to identify Cotton by name, but stated that he could identify him if he saw him. Ultimately this led to Cotton's identification before the committee. Cotton quickly became the central

²⁸⁶ Ibid

²⁸⁷ For parallels between descriptions of Cotton and the gamblers in Vicksburg in terms of the threats associated with their interactions with enslaved men and women see MDAH "The Martyrs of Mississippi" in Allan Cabiniss' *Religion in the Making* (1942) and Harnett T. Kane. *Natchez on the Mississippi* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1947), p. 71.

²⁸⁸ "Trial of Dr. Joshua Cotton," Shackelford, *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County*

character in the suspected conspiracy. Cotton then eventually implicated the majority of whites linked to the conspiracy, either through his confession or through connections made based on his occupation as a steam doctor.

Slave testimony, although inadmissible in a southern court of law, was nonetheless able to implicate white men, even though the slaves were tortured in order to obtain their testimony. Among the names mentioned were Joshua Cotton, William Saunders, and Ruel Blake.²⁸⁹ Moreover, Cotton's confession at the gallows supported theories about the involvement of these men, while simultaneously greatly expanding the list of white suspects. The men named in Cotton's confession included Andrew Boyd, Albe Dean, William Saunders, the Rawson brothers, John and William Earl, Lundsford Barnes, Lee Smith, and Ruel Blake. According to Cotton, the Rawson brothers had a list with 51 names of white men involved in the conspiracy.²⁹⁰ In mentioning Ruel Blake, Cotton contended that he, "heard Blake say he would make his negroes help, and he was equal in command to me."²⁹¹ Such statements further fed the growing frenzy among local whites of an expanded conspiracy.

²⁸⁹ Letter from Jesse Mabry to Charles Shackelford, September 20, 1835. Reprinted in Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, p. 7.

²⁹⁰ MDAH, Madison County 1835 Uprising, Subject File. Charles Elon Bowering, Sr. "Before the War in Mississippi." Also see Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, "Trial of Dr. Joshua Cotton."

²⁹¹ Ibid

Cotton's description of the plot and his purported connections to a band of criminals further accentuated these fears. Many newspaper articles about the hanging of Joshua Cotton emphasized his alleged links to the infamous John Murrell. One article stressed that, "It appears that this conspiracy was first generated by a monster in human shape, named John A. Murel, 'The Great Western Land Pirate,' but who was last year sentenced imprisonment in the penitentiary of Tennessee. Cotton, who was executed, acknowledged that he was an accomplice of Murel's, and that he had been engaged for two years."²⁹² A second account emphasized that,

"Previously to the execution of Joshua Cotton he acknowledged his guilt and the truth of the testimony by which he had been convicted; averring that he was a member of the piratical association of the notorious John A. Murrell. That he had attended several of their grand councils – the last having been held near Columbus, Mississippi. That the plan had been conceived and plotted by Murrell; and that it embraced the slaveholding states generally."²⁹³

In both accounts, Cotton's confession and connections to the legendary John Murrell expanded the scope of the threat beyond local concerns thereby creating the image of one encompassing the entire slave South. Shackleford further contends that Cotton, following William Saunders' testimony before the committee, resigned himself to his fate and

²⁹² "Horrible Details," *Liberator* (1831-1865). Boston: Aug 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136.

²⁹³ MDAH "Transactions in Mississippi," *Niles' Register*. October 17, 1835.

offered to give his account of the events in exchange for a delay in his execution. Cotton asserted that, “if the committee would pledge themselves not to have him hung immediately, that he would come out and tell them all he knew about the conspiracy.”²⁹⁴ The committee, which quickly refused his request asserted, “that they would not pledge themselves to extend any favor to him whatever; that they were satisfied as to his guilt, and that he might confess or not.”²⁹⁵

It became apparent to many observers that Cotton’s execution held more value than any further admissions on his part. According to a writer for Niles’ Register, the committee refused considering, “it of infinitely more importance to check the impending storm, by immediately destroying two of the ringleaders, and thereby creating dismay and panic among them.”²⁹⁶

Resident whites also believed that Cotton and Saunders needed to be immediately executed, not due to desires of justice or equity, but in order to instill *fear* among others who might be engaged in the suspected plot. The committee of safety and the citizens of Hinds and Madison Counties used fear and violence as tools to quell the suspected uprising, much like fear and violence were tools for controlling the enslaved population before and after fear of this particular threat declined.

²⁹⁴ “Trial of Dr. Joshua Cotton.” Shackleford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

²⁹⁵ Ibid

²⁹⁶ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi,” Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

Despite the committee's rejection of his offer, Cotton gave a confession as he was led to the gallows. This confession served as the core narrative whites in Madison and Hinds counties applied to the summer's unrest. According to Shackelford, Cotton's confession read as follows²⁹⁷:

I acknowledge my guilt, and I was one of the principle men in bringing about the conspiracy. I am one of the Murrel clan, a member of what is called the grand council. I counseled with them twice, once near Columbus, this Spring, and another time on an island in the Mississippi river. Our object in undertaking to excite the negroes to rebellion, was not for the purpose of liberating them but for plunder. I was trying to carry into effect the plan of Murrel as laid down in Stewart's pamphlet. Blake's boy, Peter, had his duty assigned him, which was to let such negroes into the secret as he could trust, generally the most daring scoundrels; the negroes on most all the large plantations knew of it; and, from the exposure of our plans in said pamphlet, we expected the citizens would be on their guard at the time mentioned-, being the 2nd of December next; and we determined to take them by surprise, and try it on the night of the 4th of July, and which would have been tried to night, (and perhaps may yet,) but for the detection of our plans.

All the names I now recollect, who are deeply concerned, are Andrew Boyd, Albe Dean, William Saunders, Two Rawsons, of Hinds county, who have a list of all the names of the men belonging to the Murrel clan in this State, being about one hundred and fifty; and the names of all who are connected with me in this conspiracy, being fifty-one. John and William Earl, near Vicksburg, in Warren County, Ruel Blake, of Madison County. I have heard Blake say he would make his negroes help, and he was equal in command with me. Lunsford Barnes, of this county; James Leach, near Woodville, Wilkinson county, Thomas Anderson, below Clinton, in Hinds County; John Rogers, near Benton, Yazoo county, Lee Smith, of Hinds

²⁹⁷ Cotton's full confession as reported by Shackelford is included due to the central role that Cotton and his narrative played in the subsequent events. In the eyes of many observers at the time, Joshua Cotton personified the threat faced by the community. His "confession" provided the foundation for much of the investigation and violence that followed.

county, and John Ivy, in Vernon.” There are arms and ammunition deposited in Hinds County, near Raymond.²⁹⁸

Ironically, while William Saunders’ testimony proved to be the most damning evidence in condemning Cotton to death, Cotton’s confession served to similarly condemn Saunders. Like Cotton, Saunders had recently moved to Mississippi from Tennessee, having arrived in the area the previous fall. Saunders initially worked as an overseer in Livingston but according to Shackelford, his, “deportment was such as to induce his employer to dismiss him.”²⁹⁹ Like Cotton, Saunders’ movements and interactions with people in the community raised suspicions. After being released as an overseer,

“...he became a steam doctor along with Dr. Cotton in Hinds County. The people with whom he boarded became suspicious of his activities, describing him often being out all hours of the night without “satisfactory” explanations. They also contended that he was often seen in remote parts of Hinds, Madison and Yazoo Counties. The suspicions ultimately drove the man with whom he boarded to ask him to leave. After being ordered to leave, he was seen in the area of Livingston on June 30th, just days before the scheduled plot.”³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ “Trial of Dr. Joshua Cotton.” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

²⁹⁹ “Trial of William Saunders.” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

³⁰⁰ Ibid

These statements as to Saunders' character caused the committee to question him, believing that he had "the deportment of a man capable of involvement in the conspiracy."³⁰¹

As with Cotton, the committee released Saunders. But they brought him back for additional examination on July 3rd after an interview with Albe Dean. Dean (who would later also be implicated as a conspirator) was being interviewed in connection with Joshua Cotton, but also testified that Saunders was, "among the promoters of the insurrection."³⁰² When brought back in, Saunders conceded that he had knowledge of the conspiracy, but had no intention of participating. Saunders claimed that Cotton, "informed him of the conspiracy, and his intentions when he requested him to join the clan, and that, when Cotton made the proposition to him he positively refused, and attempted to dissuade Cotton from the attempt, and henceforth he determined to cease all intercourse with Cotton, which determination he adhered to."³⁰³

When asked why he failed to inform others of the conspiracy if as he claimed he opposed Cotton's plan, Saunders' response further fed the emerging anxieties that an immense, well-coordinated conspiracy was planned. Saunders said he feared that, "were I to expose all I know

³⁰¹ Ibid

³⁰² Ibid

³⁰³ Ibid

respecting the conspiracy, I would have been shot down in ten minutes after entering Livingston.”³⁰⁴ He did not name others but left the distinct impression that co-conspirators could be found throughout the community, and that they were willing to kill him, and anyone else, in order to maintain their secret.

The committee found Saunders’ explanation less than convincing, but not his guilt, “The majority of the committee were of the opinion that Saunders was guilty, though they had not passed sentence on him.” Saunders’ fate was not sealed until, “Cotton came out and confessed his own guilt, disclosing the name of Saunders as one of his conspirators and chief actors in bringing about the conspiracy...whereupon the committee, by a unanimous vote found him guilty, and sentenced him to be hanged.”³⁰⁵ Saunders and Cotton, perhaps unwittingly, served as the key witnesses in each other’s trial; each condemning the other to death.

The townspeople without ceremony, hanged Cotton and Saunders together on July 4th, as sentenced by the committee. According to a letter printed in the Charleston Carrier no gallows were constructed; instead the two men were “hanged at the side of an old jail suspended from the grating

³⁰⁴ Ibid

³⁰⁵ Ibid

of the window.”³⁰⁶ A separate account expressed how “two steam doctors, one named Cotton and the other Saunders” were “hanged without law or gospel.”³⁰⁷ In yet another account, Niles’ Register reported that,

“Cotton and Saunders [were] convicted, and sentenced by the committee to be forthright hanged. The populace immediately marched them to the Old Jail; and fastening a rope to the grating of a window, in the upper story of the jail, and leaning a couple of rails against the wall, assisted the culprits against the wall, assisted the culprits upon the rails; then, adjusting the end of the rope around their necks, removed the rails. They were left hanging until the next morning.”³⁰⁸

The manner of hanging, and the decision to leave their bodies hanging in public view sent a message: the white citizenry would defend itself from any suspected insurrectionists, plunderers, or anyone attempting to destabilize their society, and they would do so violently and without hesitation.

The committee and resident whites accepted Cotton’s confessions at face value. Consequently, the men he named now became the focal point of the community’s attention. Cotton’s assertion that the Rawson brothers were involved in the conspiracy and also in possession of a list of approximately fifty-one co-conspirators immediately made them of primary

³⁰⁶ “Horrible Details.” Liberator (1831-1865). Boston: Aug 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136 (from the Charleston Carrier)

³⁰⁷ “More News From Madison, Hinds, and Warren.” Liberator; August 8, 1835; 5, 32, p. 126. From extract of a letter dated, Jackson, Mississippi, July 8th, 1835.

³⁰⁸ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi.” Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

interest. The committee dispatched a party led by captain Hiram Perkins and Stanford Hodge into Hinds County to arrest the brothers and present them before the committee for questioning.³⁰⁹ On July 6th, the party of horsemen arrested the Rawson brothers and an unnamed man as instructed. However, they were unable to return them to the committee as a man named Mat Sharkey intervened in their defense.³¹⁰ Sharkey was a prominent landholder in Hinds County, described in one account as, “a man who has stood high in the estimation of his fellow citizens, and is a wealthy man, working 60 hands.”³¹¹ Sharkey was not suspected of any involvement in the unrest, but believed the Rawsons innocent of any wrongdoing and thus refused to allow them to be turned over to the committee. Additionally, Sharkey questioned the right of an external judicial authority, especially one created outside the mechanisms of state law, to extend its power into Hinds County and arrest four of its citizens. Consequently, Sharkey blocked the arrest and took the four men to his home for protection.

The following day, Perkins and Hodge reported back to the committee in Livingston of Sharkey’s actions and their inability to make their arrests.

This information:

³⁰⁹ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi.” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835.

³¹⁰ “Horrible Details.” *Liberator* (1831-1865), Boston: Aug 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136 (from the *Charleston Carrier*)

³¹¹ *Ibid*

“excited the greatest indignation against Sherkie [sp], and the suspicion of many that he was an accomplice. This gentleman had heretofore always borne the most reputable character, is wealthy, and his family connections numerous and influential. A scrutiny of the motives which influenced him in the rescue of the Rawsons, was loudly demanded and determined upon.”³¹²

Many suspected that Sharkey might be involved in the conspiracy as well and pressed for his arrest and questioning along with that of the Rawson brothers.

The committee issued a firm response. Contrary to Sharkey’s misgivings, the committee asserted that it clearly possessed the authority to order the arrest of suspects in surrounding counties. Consequently, the committee issued a statement, “that gave additional support and ordered that they be brought in at all costs.”³¹³ The committee sent a posse to the Sharkey home, ordering, “the detachment to be strengthened and to recapture the Rawsons” as well as Sharkey should he continue to intervene.³¹⁴ Rather than serving as a moderating force as many suggested, the committee’s actions proved to escalate an already tense situation.

³¹² MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi.” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835.

³¹³ MDAH Madison County 1835 Uprising, subject file, *Before the War in Madison County*, Charles Elon Bowering, Sr., p. 23.

³¹⁴ “Horrible Details.” *Liberator* (1831-1865). Boston: Aug 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136 (from the Charleston Carrier)

According to one report, the posse approached Sharkey's home, "with less prudence than valor."³¹⁵ Aware of the approaching threat, Sharkey took his family to an outhouse on his property in order to better position himself for their defense. The resulting assault in many ways resembled the attack on the North home in Vicksburg as a patrol attempted to run off suspected gamblers.³¹⁶

According to Nile's Register, Sharkey prepared "himself with firearms, resolved to make a determined defence." As Perkins and his posse discovered Sharkey's location, they,

"directed their course thither, and reaching the house, swore he would arrest Sherkie (sp), who, preparing, shot Perkins in passing a window, [which Proved mortal the next day]. The fire was instantly returned, by which Sherkie had his right hand dreadfully shattered. Repeating the fire, he wounded Mr. Hodge in the thigh, and by another shot he wounded Mr. Reynolds's horse, and narrowly missed him, cutting the collar of his coat. A brisk fire was kept up for some minutes, when Perkins' party retreated. Sherkie, then, with his family, evacuated the house, and the next day surrendered himself to the civil authority of Hinds County."³¹⁷

The people of Hinds County supported Sharkey's contention that the Livingston committee exceeded its authority in attempting to arrest members of their community. Sharkey chose to submit himself before a Hinds

³¹⁵ MDAH "Transactions in Mississippi." Niles' Register, October 17, 1835.

³¹⁶ "Uses and Abuses of Lynch Law" The American Whig Review, March 1851; 7, 3. p. 213. "Lynch's Law," The Farmer's Cabinet, 1835-07-31, vol. 33; issue 48: p. 2. MDAH "Transactions in Mississippi," Niles' Register, October 17, 1835

³¹⁷ MDAH "Transactions in Mississippi." Niles' Register, October 17, 1835.

County committee, “which had previously been organized... for the same purpose as that in Livingston, after maturely deliberating on the circumstances which had produced this unfortunate conflict, thoroughly acquitted Mr. Sherkie of all dishonourable motives or intentions, as the following facts developed.”³¹⁸ Through their actions, the people of Hinds County asserted their authority to protect their citizens, not only from those suspected of insurrection, but from possible abuses at the hands of surrounding white communities as well.

The following day, the Livingston committee received word that Ruel Blake had been captured in Vicksburg and was being transported “under escort of a guard” back to Livingston for questioning and sentencing.³¹⁹ The townspeople feared that Blake’s suspected co-conspirators would attempt a rescue and sent a party to ensure his safe transport back. “On the 9th, at 3 o’clock, P.M. he was brought in by a party of 40 horsemen, headed by Mr. Albert G. Bennet, and delivered over to the committee.”³²⁰ Shackelford contends in his official report that had it not been for the

³¹⁸ Ibid

³¹⁹ “Horrible Details.” **Liberator** (1831-1865). Boston: Aug 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136 (from the Charleston Carrier)

³²⁰ Ibid

presence of the committee, Blake would have, “in all probability been forcibly taken from the guard, and immediately executed.”³²¹

The resulting inquiry left no doubt in the minds of local whites as to Blake’s guilt. According to Shackelford, “It was in evidence before the committee that he had engaged his own negroes to rebel on the night of the 4th of July, and that he had promised to assist them. In corroboration of the above, his own negroes testified that he told them that there was to be an insurrection of the negroes on the night of the 4th of July.”³²² The committee also received testimonies from the slaves hung at Beatties’ Bluff, which accused Blake of being a leader in the plot. Likewise, Cotton implicated Blake in his confession before the committee as having been involved in the plot as well as having heard Blake tell his slaves that he would assist them in the uprising.³²³

The committee reached a quick decision regarding Blake’s guilt. “There being no doubt on the minds of the committee, he was by a unanimous vote condemned to be hanged.”³²⁴ According to the Niles’ Register,

³²¹ “Trial of Ruel Blake.” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

³²² Ibid

³²³ Letter from Jesse Mabry to Charles Shackelford, September 20, 1835. Reprinted in Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, p. 7.

³²⁴ “Trial of Ruel Blake.” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

Ruel Blake was taken under guard to the Smith's shop, where his irons were knocked off. After washing his face and hands, and dressing himself neatly in a suit of white, he was conducted to the gallows, (a rude one, hastily erected, by two forks sunk in the ground and a pole across), in the centre of town. He approached it with a steady unfaltering step. At length, arriving at the foot of the gallows, and looking up, his soul seemed to tremble within at the awful journey it was about to undertake, and his eyes filled with tears. He struggled to recall his scattered senses, which at length returned to his relief. He inquired for one or two persons, and having requested them to attend to some of his worldly concerns, shook hands and bid them adieu.³²⁵

Various sources state that Blake maintained his innocence while simultaneously praising the actions of the committee. Shackelford maintains that Blake, "privately commended the verdict of the committee, and said they could not have done otherwise than condemn him, from the evidence before them, and publicly, under the gallows made the same declaration. He protested his innocence to the last, and said that his life was sworn away."³²⁶

In a separate account, Blake is reported to have made the following statement as he approached the gallows:

"and if I was as innocent of all other sins, as I am of the charge for which I am now about to suffer, I would not, as I now do, fear the approach of death. And now, before man, (from whom I shall shortly escape), and Almighty and Eternal God, (into whose presence I must shortly appear), I do most solemnly deny the charge which has been alleged against me, and as solemnly do I invoke the wrath and imprecations of heaven if I am not utterly and absolutely innocent. Do not blame the committee; I believe that they have been influenced by the best motives for the benefit of

³²⁵ MDAH "Transactions in Mississippi." *Niles' Register*, October 17, 1835.

³²⁶ "Trial of Ruel Blake." Shackelford, *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County*.

the community. I think the evidence adduced to them was amply sufficient to warrant my condemnation. But I am not less innocent on that account.”³²⁷

Despite continued protestations of innocence, the residents of Livingston executed Ruel Blake on July 10th, between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m.

Other men implicated by Joshua Cotton met with a similar fate. Albe Dean, a Connecticut native who had resided in Mississippi for approximately 2 years was described as, ““a lazy, indolent man, having very little pretensions to honesty.”³²⁸ It was believed that Dean, like Cotton, had worked as a steam doctor in the area leading up to the suspected plot. His image as a man who sympathized with slaves, however, caused Dean to draw even further suspicion. Dean “was known to associate with negroes, and would often come to the owners of runaways and intercede with their masters to save them from a whipping.”³²⁹ Additionally, witnesses charged that Dean was known to travel throughout the area inquiring about runaway horses. Local whites believed that this served simply as a ruse in order to congregate among the enslaved population and to stir unrest.³³⁰

Dean was brought before the committee on July 6th. As the narrative continues,

³²⁷ MDAH “Transactions in Mississippi.” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835.

³²⁸ “Trial of Albe Dean.” Shackelford, *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County*.

³²⁹ Ibid

³³⁰ Ibid

It was testified before the committee (not known by whom) that Dean inquired on his way to Livingston whether certain slaves had been involved in the conspiracy. Those slaves are described as “Mr. W. P. Perkin’s negroes”...”and particularly if Hudnall’s Ned, (a noted villain, whom he, Dean had often endeavored to screen from a whipping) was not concerned. He also inquired if Mr. Wm. Johnson’s, Ruel Blake’s, and some other gentlemen’s negroes were not accused. He was not aware at the time, the very negroes about whom his inquiries were made had not only been suspected, but some of them actually hung, and when informed Blake’s negro had been hung, asked if he made any disclosures about him.”³³¹

The committee found Dean guilty, “of aiding and exciting the negroes in insurrection, and sentenced to be hanged.”³³²

Cotton also implicated Lee Smith, described as a resident of Hinds County who had recently moved from Tennessee. Some suggested that Lee may have been one of the suppliers of weapons and ammunition for the plot. “When the guard approached him to take him in for questioning, he was in the process of cleaning a gun and the guards were of the belief that he was considering trying to get to another gun in the yard. Upon being told that if he got this second gun he would be shot, ‘He was so alarmed as to faint.’”³³³ Though Smith denied being acquainted with Cotton, members of the committee believed otherwise. Shackelford contends that it “was proven satisfactorily, that he was one of the firm of Cotton, Saunders, & Co. in the

³³¹ Ibid

³³² Ibid

³³³ “Trial of Lee Smith.” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

steam practice.”³³⁴ The committee received little evidence connecting Smith to the suspected conspiracy, while receiving numerous testimonies as to his good character. The committee determined to spare Smith’s life, but “requested” that he leave the state “in as short a time as convenient...” [However] After his discharge he was taken by some of the citizens of Hinds County (where he lived) and Lynched.”³³⁵ The committee had the power to interrogate suspects and issue sentencing. Ultimately, however, as witnessed once again in the case of Lee Smith, the broader community determined whether the committee’s rulings were sufficient, and in areas where disagreements arose, the will of the citizenry won out.

A few men brought before the committee through Cotton’s confession were able to escape such consequences. Lundsford Barnes, like Lee Smith, was known throughout the community as of man with good, solid character. However, he was also described as young, “very ignorant, and uneducated” and “often seen in company with Cotton, and Saunders, and others who were represented by Cotton to be of the Murrel clan.”³³⁶ These less than flattering qualities may have benefitted Barnes in the estimation of the committee. Following a brief investigation, the committee, considering his youth and the minimal evidence against him decided not to convict him of

³³⁴ Ibid

³³⁵ Ibid

³³⁶ “Trial of Lundsford Barnes.” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

the charges brought before them. They simply, “ordered him to leave the county, which he has done.”³³⁷

William Benson also named by Cotton, was spared as well. Although his “name was mentioned by negroes in some disclosures made at Vernon”³³⁸ the committee had little evidence to corroborate his involvement. According to the record, the only evidence submitted was the, “testimony of R. Blake’s negro man who said Benson asked him if it was not a hard case for the negroes to remain in slavery; and said that they ought to be free, which they might easily be, there being at least twenty negroes to one white man; and with *sticks* alone they might whip the white man.”³³⁹ The committee was not convinced of Benson’s ability to engage in a conspiracy. “He was considered by the committee a great fool, little above an idiot, and the best way to dispose of him, would be to *order* him off; which he complied with.”³⁴⁰

As fears expanded to include suspected white involvement in the alleged plot, the presence of a number of tensions among Mississippi whites becomes clear. The creation of the committee, constructed through the involvement of broad sections of the community, suggests that the people of

³³⁷ Ibid

³³⁸ “Trial of William Benson.” Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County.

³³⁹ Ibid

³⁴⁰ Ibid

Hinds and Madison Counties approached this perceived threat with a singular voice and a singular purpose. In actuality, the response was vastly more fractured. The committee's influence, though significant, remained limited throughout the threat. These communities remained fluid, constantly changing the definitions of who would or would not be viewed as members. Those who were excluded faced the brutal punishments if suspected of involvement in the potential uprising. Conversely, citizens of "good character" or those believed to be in good standing were often able to escape punishment, even following sentencing from the committee.

Power, and the desire to maintain "order" drove the actions of Mississippi whites during July of 1835. Slaveholders intended to maintain control over their enslaved population as well as over those whites in the community not viewed as sufficiently committed to preserving slavery. The presence of whites in the unrest helps to explain the rapidly expanding levels of violence. In addition, purported white involvement also expanded the ways in which Mississippi's defenders of slavery viewed the unrest. Rather than a localized threat, restricted to a few plantations throughout the region, whites interested in suppressing the threat began to view their local unrest within an evolving national context. As evidenced by a series of national events during this period, Mississippians faced threats to its "tranquility"

from both internal and external sources. The combination of these threats, as will be seen, came to shape the escalation of violence, the broader justifications for their actions, and ultimately the decline in torture and violence over the latter portion of July.

CHAPTER 5

“THE REGULATORS NEED REGULATING:” MISSISSIPPI’S VIOLENCE AND (DIS)ORDER WITHIN A NATIONAL CONTEXT

As the month of July wore on, the committees of safety in Madison and Hinds counties continued to present themselves as the legal and moral authority in defense of their communities. In many senses, such representations were for those outside the region as much as for themselves. As violence, and in some instances what might be described as chaos, escalated over these days and weeks through the first half of July, Mississippians realized that their actions would continue to face increased external scrutiny. In an effort to shape perceptions of local actions, an editorial from the Niles’ Register acknowledged the increased violence, while simultaneously proclaiming the righteousness of their actions. According to the editors,

“Some excesses have been committed, and will, in all communities; but it makes the virtuous part of the community not less justifiable on that account. It is only necessary to visit and become acquainted with the Mississippians, to be thoroughly of the opinion that they are as enterprising, intelligent, generous, magnanimous, and chivalric, as any within the limits of the United States.”³⁴¹

³⁴¹ “Transactions in Mississippi,” Niles’ Register, October 17, 1835.

The writer stressed his belief that excessive actions taken in response to the threat represented individual abuses, rather than systemic problems within Mississippi. According to the editors, Mississippians, like Americans elsewhere, sought only to protect themselves from perceived threats. The fact that they viewed these threats to be “real” and imminent only served to justify their responses.

In a letter written to his wife on July 12, 1835, William Thomson succinctly described his views of the process of investigation and punishment sweeping through the state. Thomson recognized the absence of any true system of law, arguing instead that town regulators possessed the powers of judge, jury, and executioner. According to Thomson, individuals throughout the region had begun to mete out summary “justice” to those suspected of involvement in the plot. Furthermore,

“every negro they meet who does not give a good account for himself they take up or shoot down. The laws have been superseded by regulators, who have a summary mode of administering justice in these cases. When a negro or white man is suspected of being in any way connected with the plot, they arrest him, appoint a jury, examine witnesses, render the verdict, pass sentence and execute – all upon the spot, barely giving the culprit time to commend himself to the Throne of Mercy.”³⁴²

Thomson’s letter expresses an understanding that local whites would not be constrained by any limitations placed on them by the rules of law. Local

³⁴² MDAH “Letter from Dr. William H. Thomson to his wife,” July 12, 1835 from Hinds County, Mississippi. John A. Murrell Clippings.

conceptions of “justice” held more sway than any allegiances to the “law.” As such, many simply came to equate suspicion with guilt, and violence or death with justice.

Even letters written by those supportive of the escalating violence in Mississippi spoke of the use of “summary justice” in describing the evolving condition. In a letter written by “a gentleman of high standing in Clinton, Mississippi, dated July 5th, 1835,” the author describes the hangings of two white men “and seven negroes at least.” In his view, “About Livingston the excitement was the greatest, but the summary justice of the Mississippians has probably quelled the spirit for many years to come.”³⁴³ The author expresses the often unspoken objective of this “summary violence;” a desire to not only stop the current turmoil in Mississippi, but of equal importance, breaking the “spirit” of those who might engage in insurrectionary efforts in the future.

Similarly, an article appearing in the Niles’ Register discussed what the author viewed as justice, passed down through the verdict of “Judge Lynch.” This brief summary of the growing violence contends that, “...on the 7th or 8th of July, ten negroes and two white men were tried in Madison County, by Judge Lynch, for being concerned in the insurrection among the

³⁴³ “Servile Insurrection in Mississippi,” Liberator. Boston; August 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 123 [From the Lynchburg (VA) Democrat].

negroes in that state – found guilty – and *hung!*”³⁴⁴ Furthermore, the article’s author also claims that “twenty four negroes and twelve white men besides had been tried, found guilty”³⁴⁵ and would certainly be hanged as well. In antebellum Mississippi, as well as in the decades to follow, “Judge Lynch” and Lynch law represented the final judgment of the broader community. Legal rights and protections meant little when faced with the summary judgment of Lynch law.

This sort of dynamic can be seen in the case of an unnamed man ultimately found innocent by the courts in Jefferson County. The Liberator quotes an article from a Mississippi newspaper in which

“an old man, who had been acquitted by a jury...had no sooner left the courthouse, than he was stripped of his clothing, covered with tar and feathers, and whipped till he was insensible; that spirits of turpentine was poured over him to restore his senses; that he was then mounted on a rail, and borne through the town, amidst the shouts of the multitude; and that when the horrible outrages had been perpetrated, he was driven beyond the limits of the county, with menaces of vengeance, should he attempt to return.”³⁴⁶

While the race of the man is unclear from the article, it is significant that the fact that a jury had found this man innocent meant little to the townspeople.

In the chaotic environment of that moment, the townspeople believed that their perceptions of innocence and guilt superseded those of the jury. In

³⁴⁴ MDAH “Gamblers in the West” Niles’ Register, August 8, 1835, p. 401.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ “Lynch’s Law,” reprinted in The Liberator Boston: August 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 123.

many cases, they believed that the judicial system, rather than aiding in their defense, limited their ability to protect the community from the surrounding threat.

A similar relationship between acquittal and punishment can be seen in the description of the inquiries of Hiram Hall, William Benson, Yansford Barnes, and Nichols, four white men, who all received acquittals from the courts only to be subsequently ordered to leave the state within forty-eight hours, “or to receive 500 lashes, and not to return under penalty of death; (of course, they tramped, and thank ye, too!)”³⁴⁷ As evidenced by the ending of this description, the authors understood the role that fear and intimidation played in their actions. They believed that through violence and threats of further violence, they could rid the community of all who might later pose a threat to their community or to the institution of slavery that rests at its core.

A July 15th article from Clinton, Mississippi further substantiates this sentiment, which was cross-racial. According to the article, five whites were hanged in Clinton and one in Benton. Additionally, white residents hanged between fifteen and twenty blacks with, “no doubt of the guilt of all.”³⁴⁸ In addition, several other whites in the county “have been lynched and ordered

³⁴⁷ “Horrible Details,” Liberator. Boston: August 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136 [from the Charleston Carrier].

³⁴⁸ “Further Outrages from the South,” Liberator. Boston: August 15, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 33; p. 130.

off.”³⁴⁹ The article concludes by describing the treatment of a local white man named Lee Smith. Despite the committee’s determination that insufficient evidence existed to order Smith’s death, the townspeople ultimately issued their own ruling. According to the newspaper description,

“We are also informed that Lee Smith, who was mentioned in one of the letters published in our last paper, as one of the captains of the white gang, received 300 lashes and was dismissed, the evidence not justifying death. Subsequent information, however, of his connection with the plot, led to orders for his second arrest – but satisfied with what he got, he had ‘skinned out,’ and thereby saved his neck from the rope.”³⁵⁰

The author appears satisfied with Smith’s decision to flee. Despite escaping “the rope,” those looking to maintain order believed that Smith’s removal from the area served their ultimate objective of preserving order within their community. Local citizens believed that order would best be preserved through the removal of those not willing or able to acquiesce to the community’s mores. Whether such removal resulted from the death of suspected deviants or through their willingness to flee possible retributive actions meant little to those who viewed themselves as the protectors of the community’s interests.

Clearly then, anyone even suspected of involvement in the unrest was under a great deal of risk. Even if acquitted, one might expect the

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

townspeople to take matters into their own hands. Acquitted persons could be beaten, banished from the state, or executed. Understanding this, some residents took great lengths to avoid being questioned. For instance, an article from the Charleston Carrier describes how a suspected white conspirator, Andrew Boyd, successfully escaped the gallows by “miraculously” swimming across the Big Black River and,

“...running through cane brakes and swamps until night fall, when the party called off the dogs. Early the next morning they renewed the chase, and started Boyd one more mile from whence they had called off the dogs. But he effected his escape on horse, (fortune throwing one in his way) the hounds not being accustomed to that training after he quit the bushes.”³⁵¹

To some, Boyd’s efforts to flee might suggest his involvement in illicit activities during this period of unrest. However, his actions could just as likely represent his understanding of the consequences associated with suspicion as opposed to verifiable guilt. Placing his life in the hands of the enraged community clearly came with great risk.

When pressed to explain such extralegal actions, defenders of the rising violence in Mississippi placed their activities within a broader emerging national context of unrest. Fear of insurrection was not isolated to Mississippi during the summer of 1835. Whites throughout the slave states

³⁵¹ “Horrible Details,” Liberator. Boston: August 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136 [from the Charleston Carrier].

believed themselves to be engaged in an expanding battle with the young emerging abolitionist movement. Though as we have seen, patterns of unrest among the enslaved communities of Mississippi can be traced back to the very establishment of slavery in the region, a new more vocal threat began to emerge in the 1830s. The actions of northern abolitionists during the summer of 1835 helped to solidify the fears and concerns of many southern defenders of slavery.³⁵²

Northern abolitionists' efforts to end slavery did not begin in the summer of 1835. However, this proved to be a period of increased growth, action, and an increasing focus on immediacy within the movement. These progressions only added to the apprehensions of Mississippians and defenders of slavery across the South. Abolitionists published a number of important antislavery newspapers and journals beginning as early as 1819 with Elihu Embree's Manumission Intelligencer.³⁵³ A number of other abolitionist publications emerged throughout the 1820s and 1830s including Benjamin Lundy's Genius of Universal Emancipation (1821) and most importantly William Lloyd Garrison's (Boston) Liberator (1831), along with

³⁵² For discussions of the rising tensions and fears in the slave states in connection to the growing abolitionist movement in the 1830s and Nat Turner's rebellion see for example Stephen F. Oates, The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), Scot French, The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), and Stanley Harrold, The Abolitionists and the South, 1831 – 1861 (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1995).

³⁵³ Beginning in April of 1820, the Manumission Intelligencer, published in Jonesboro, Tennessee shifted from a weekly to a monthly paper and began publication under the name The Emancipator.

the Emancipator out of New York City in 1833.³⁵⁴ With the emergence of the Liberator, the language of abolition took on a radical tone, calling for the immediate and total uncompensated abolition of slavery. In tandem, southern whites took a more aggressive stance, feeling deeply threatened by this new antislavery surge. Garrison, who came to represent the image of northern abolitionists in the eyes of many across the South, clearly articulated his position on abolition and slavery. In a “Letter to the Public” first appearing in the initial publication of the Liberator on January 1, 1831, Garrison wrote of:

“the ‘self-evident truth’ maintained in the American Declaration of Independence, ‘that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights --- among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,’ [therefore] I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.”³⁵⁵

Garrison further expressed his understanding that many would certainly be critical of his actions. But he maintained there was cause for “severity” and that he was up to the task:

I am aware, that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I *will* be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this

³⁵⁴ For discussions of the emerging abolitionist movement see, Henry Mayer, William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), Paul Goodman, Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), John H. Bracy, Blacks in the Abolitionist Movement (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publication Company, 1971); and Herbert Aptheker, Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989).

³⁵⁵ Reprinted in Wendell Phillips Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life, Told By His Children, vol. 1. (New York: The Century Company, 1885), p. 226.

subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hand of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; -- but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest -- I will not equivocate -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- AND I WILL BE HEARD.³⁵⁶

Southern defenders of slavery who considered Garrison's statement a call to arms in defense of the institution were further aroused when just eight months after Garrison's editorial, the blood curdling rebellion occurred in South Hampton, Virginia.³⁵⁷

In the spring of 1835, Northern abolitionists sought to expand their activities and, "sow the good seeds of abolition thoroughly over the whole country."³⁵⁸ Abolitionists efforts throughout the spring and early summer of 1835 centered on spreading their message more broadly, reaching beyond appeals to those who naturally might support their efforts and directly into the slave states. As part of a massive national mailing campaign, Lewis Tappan of New York, Garrison, and their anti-slavery supporters put together a mailing list comprised of approximately one hundred seventy five thousand individuals. Significantly, the names of Southerners made up

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ See Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), and F. Roy Johnson, *The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection* (Murfreesboro, NC: Johnson Publishing Company, 1966).

³⁵⁸ Lewis Tappan, *Emancipator* June 9, 1835.

approximately twenty five thousand of those appearing on this mailing list.³⁵⁹ Abolitionists began sending mailings to those on the compiled list during July of 1835. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues, “the material was hardly designed to provoke deep thinking on the slavery question, particularly on the part of Southerners.”³⁶⁰ The material was provocative; meant to emphasize the immorality of slavery and to publicize abolitionists’ efforts to end the system. According to the editors of Human Rights, the goal of the mailing campaign was not, “conversion but advertisement of the cause.”³⁶¹ The editors continued the explanation of their efforts, stating, “If you wish to draw off a people from a mad or wicked custom, you must beat up for a march; you must make an excitement, do something that everyone will notice.”³⁶²

Abolitionists understood that Southerners would not respond lightly to these provocative acts. In a letter written by New York’s Elizur Wright to Beriah Green of Ohio, Wright spoke of the magnitude of the abolitionists’ actions and the expected southern response: “We are beginning to see ahead of us a conflict which will outdo – far – all the skirmishes of the past.”

³⁵⁹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “The Abolitionists Postal Campaign of 1835” Journal of Negro History, Vol. 50. No. 4 (Oct. 1965), p. 229.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Human Rights was a journal founded by prominent New York abolitionist Lewis Tappan.

³⁶² Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “The Abolitionists Postal Campaign of 1835” Journal of Negro History, Vol. 50. No. 4 (Oct. 1965), p. 229.

Some Southerners, Wright believed, “will rave and scold and threaten.”³⁶³

These expectations were not without adequate justification. To be sure, Southern defenses of slavery did not begin in response to the increasingly aggressive abolitionist rhetoric of the 1830s. However, just as clearly, this increased activity coincided with increased efforts by southerners to justify and defend the institution.³⁶⁴ Thus, abolitionists anticipated strong pushback from the defenders of slavery, but like others were appalled at the level of violence taking place in Mississippi in 1835.

Southerners reacted on a number of levels to the growing militancy of northern abolitionists. In July of 1835, Reverend William S. Plummer of Richmond, Virginia wrote a letter to the chairman of the Committee of Correspondence calling for a public meeting of the clergy of Richmond on the subject of abolition. Plummer wrote, “Let them (the Abolitionists) understand that they will be CAUGHT IF THEY COME AMONG US, and they will take good care to keep out of our way. If Abolitionists will set the country in a blaze, it is but fair that they should receive the first warming of

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Prior to this era, southerners grounded their arguments in defense of slavery by claiming that the institution was a “necessary evil.” Alongside the rise of northern abolitionist rhetoric southerners, led by spokesmen such as John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, began to articulate a defense of slavery grounded in the imagery of the institution as a “positive good.” For example, see John C. Calhoun, “Slavery a Positive Good,” Speech to the United States Senate, 1837.

the fire.”³⁶⁵ On July 29, 1835, a group of men in Charleston, South Carolina known as the “Lynch Men” broke into the post office and removed the mailings from the American Anti-Slavery Society before publicly burning them along with three effigies of prominent abolitionists the following day before a crowd of nearly two thousand residents.³⁶⁶

In an act that further demonstrates the southern belief that expanding abolitionist activities equated to northern incursions upon southern rights and freedoms, Alabama’s Governor John Gayle demanded that New York’s Governor William L. Marcy deliver the American Anti-Slavery Society’s publishing editor E. G. Williams to the state of Alabama to stand trial. A grand jury in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama had indicted Williams, “for publishing in the ‘Emancipator,’ at New York, the following sentences: 'God commands, and all nature cries out, that man should not be held as property. The system of making men property has plunged 2,250,000 of our fellow-countrymen into the deepest physical and moral degradation, and they are every moment sinking deeper.'”³⁶⁷ From the perspective of Alabama

³⁶⁵ De Robigne Mortimer Bennett, *The Champions of the Church: Their crimes and Persecutions* (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1878), p. 955.

³⁶⁶ Susan Wylly-Jones, “The 1835 Anti-Abolition Meetings in the South: A New Look at the Controversy Over the Abolition Postal Campaign” (*Civil War History*. Vol. XLVII No. 4, 2001) p. 289.

³⁶⁷ De Robigne Mortimer Bennett, *The Champions of the Church: Their crimes and Persecutions* (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1878), p. 955.

Governor Gayle, and slavery's defenders, statements regarding the immorality of slavery amounted to nothing less than crimes against the state.

As efforts to respond to the suspected plot continued throughout July, Mississippi defenders of slavery began to more openly frame their arguments by linking the suspected unrest to abolitionist connections and influences. Angus Donovan, a white man implicated in the purported uprising, symbolized the supposed link between abolitionists and the region's unrest. Among the first white men targeted for involvement in the suspected plot, Donovan was brought in for questioning on July 2nd. Reports of Donovan's interactions with enslaved men and women led to initial concerns about his involvement. According to Shackelford's report on the trial, Donovan "was repeatedly found in the negro cabins, enjoying himself in negro society."³⁶⁸ After discovery of the plot, "he would be found sneaking about the negro quarters, seeking opportunities to converse with them; and was caught at the house when the discovery was made, engaged in earnest conversation with the girls who divulged the plot."³⁶⁹ As the investigation continued, Donovan's interactions with slaves increasingly became a central focus. According to testimony,

"Even after several negroes were taken under suspicion, he still persisted in his attempts to converse with them, and at

³⁶⁸ Shackelford, Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, "Trial of Angus Donovan."

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

one time actually undertook (while citizens were examining one) to release a negro who was tied, which negro afterwards implicated him. He was requested by the gentlemen who were examining the negroes, not to come about them; they were compelled to take this step, from the fact, that when he was present, the *negroes would say nothing*, for the experiment was frequently tried, for when they were apprized that Donovan was not present, their disclosures were full, complete, and corresponding; the experiment was tried two or three times with the same success.”³⁷⁰

One enslaved man, himself condemned to death, purportedly named Donovan as being involved in the uprising. He claimed that Donovan assured him that the enslaved population could attain their freedom if they were willing to, “kill all the white people, and if they should be pushed that he [Donovan] would take them to a free state.”³⁷¹

The most damning testimony against Donovan came from a man described as “a young white man of unimpeachable character,” who appears to have served as an overseer on one of the local plantations. According to his testimony,

“he and Donovan were walking through the field of his employer about the 25th or 26th of May, when Donovan remarked to him, that he should hate to be an overseer very much. Witness asked him why? He answered, it was such cruel work to be whipping the poor negroes as he was obliged to do. Witness told him he never whipped only when they deserved it, and that was not often. Donovan exclaimed – my friend, you will not have use for this long, at the same time putting his hand on the witness’ whip.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

Witness was a little astonished, and asked him to explain himself. Donovan by way of explanation remarked, the reason why he would not have use for it long was, that the negroes would all soon be free in this state. Witness replied, he knew the owners were not going to set them free, and that he (Donovan) ought to know that they could not effect their liberty by force, as they had tried it two or three times, and always failed, and that he thought they were now contented to remain in slavery.³⁷²

Donovan's response to the overseer's remarks was most threatening. He asserted that, "*they could obtain their liberty by force, and that they would do it, not by themselves, but with the aid of thousands of rich, smart white men, who were ready to head them, with money, arms, and ammunition for their use.*"[Italics mine]³⁷³ These statements suggest that the threat to order in Mississippi was linked to the national abolitionist movement, not only to the actions of a few misguided white opportunists or deviants.

As expected, Donovan was hanged. At his execution, a member of the crowd reportedly exclaimed, "thus died an abolitionist and let his blood be on the hands of those who sent him here."³⁷⁴ Much like Reverend Plummer of Virginia, who proclaimed that abolitionists "would be caught if

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ MDAH Madison County 1835 Uprising, subject file, Before the War in Madison County, Charles Elon Bowering, Sr., p. 23.

they come among us,” the people of Madison County determined to hang Donovan in order to send a similar message to abolitionists in their midst.³⁷⁵

As seen in the previous chapter, many white Mississippians linked the emerging threat to the actions and imagery of John Murrell, a suspected gambler, horse thief, and slave thief. In The Martyrs of Mississippi, written in 1942, Allen Cabiniss describes a public memory of the threat that increases its perception beyond that of simple unrest spurred by gamblers and abolitionists, describing the events thusly: “Being in communication with some of the Northern Abolitionists and receiving money from them, Murrell[I] added to his scheme the instigation of servile insurrection, feeding the slaves on tales of Toussaint L’Ouverture.”³⁷⁶ Combining these three elements (Murrell, abolitionists, and Haiti) into a singular threat, Cabiniss demonstrates the ways in which constructed definitions of “others” are used to create and justify the white community’s response.

By linking the Northern abolitionists to an unsavory character such as Murrell Mississippians created images of these antislavery advocates as lawless, unscrupulous threats to southern ideas of tranquility and order. Thus, the mistreatment of anyone perceived as an abolitionist’s ally could be excused and rationalized. Their violent responses and the accompanying

³⁷⁵ De Robigne Mortimer Bennett, The Champions of the Church: Their crimes and Persecutions (New York: D.M. Bennett, 1878), p. 955.

³⁷⁶ MDAH Allen Cabiniss, Religion in the Making. “The Martyrs of Mississippi.” 1942.

justifications express their willingness to place the execution of “justice” (as they perceived it) above the law. Any actions taken on their part in defense of slavery and “order,” even those exceeding the traditional powers granted within the American judicial system, remained justified in their view.

Conversely, any actions taken in opposition to such efforts immediately came to be viewed as lawless and extreme.

Cabiniss’ attempt to link the activities of abolitionists and unrest in Mississippi with imagery of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the legacy of the Haitian Revolution is perhaps more insightful. Obviously, Mississippians viewed the Haitian Revolution as an example of the ultimate threat they faced each day, surrounded by enslaved people who could potentially engage in a deadly revolution of their own.³⁷⁷ Such imagery kept Mississippians on edge, fed their anxieties, and ultimately shaped their responses to the suspected plot.

Although there is little indication of an actual direct abolitionist threat or leadership role in fomenting insurrection in Mississippi in 1835, abolitionists’ writings presented strong criticisms of the expanding

³⁷⁷ For details of the Haitian Revolution and its role in spreading fear of insurrection within the slave states of the American South see, C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). For discussions of the relationship between fears of the Haitian Revolution and North American insurrectionary plots see Douglas Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1999), and Kenneth Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

lawlessness in Mississippi. After suggestions of abolitionist involvement in the unrest emerged, one editorial denied the connection:

“No *real* abolitionist could have [been involved]. The leaders are represented to have been white men, whose object was plunder. They seduced the slaves to join them. Thus the masters reap the fruits of their ungodly scheme of keeping their bondmen in Egyptian darkness, so that they are easily ensnared by the first imposter who comes along. If they were taught to examine and reflect, they would reject the plans of wretches, moved by as much avarice as their own kidnappers, or the robbers of their wages, or the ‘associated negro-thieves.’”³⁷⁸

This abolitionist denial of involvement contains many of the same racialized views of enslaved men and women as one might find in arguments presented by the defenders of slavery. However, through the portrayal of enslaved men and women as victims of the system of slavery, this editorial provides a broader critique of the system itself. Rather than suggesting that enslaved men and women lacked the natural intellectual capacities of whites, this response demonstrates a belief that it is the system of slavery, a system that deliberately keeps, “their bondmen in Egyptian darkness,” that is responsible for the abject conditions of the enslaved population. If, as local whites contended, unsavory whites could manipulate enslaved men and women to rebel, this was ultimately a consequence of the conditions that the system of slavery helped to create.

³⁷⁸ “Troubles in Mississippi Confirmed,” Liberator (Boston: August 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 123.

In many of these critiques, the arguments against the abuses extended beyond questions of slavery or emancipation. The very definitions of American justice and Constitutional protections seemed to be at stake. An August 1st, 1835 editorial lamented the presence of lynching, describing the acts as demonstrative of a total, “disregard for the law.”³⁷⁹ Describing these committees of safety as, “self constituted examining committee[s], without even the color of authority or law,” the author argues that, “Whether these stories are true to the full extent related, we have no means of determining, but the truth of any of them, or even a portion of one of them, ought to give occasion to the most serious reflection.”³⁸⁰

This abolitionist argument directly counters those initially presented in defense of the establishment of these committees of safety. Whereas these committees justified their actions as necessary to protect their interests due to the limitations of the American judicial system, such critiques contended that their very presence was in opposition to the law. Rather than being *necessary* “extralegal” activities, northern critiques presented their actions as “illegal;” denying individuals protections of their basic Constitutional rights:

“...here is a system, which places all property, all right, and even life itself, at the mercy of such persons, whether

³⁷⁹ “Lynch’s Law,” Liberator. Boston: August 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 123.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

acting under the impulses of frenzy or deliberate revenge, as may choose to combine, at any time or place, for the purpose of evil. Such outrages inflict deep and incurable wounds on the peace, as well as the character, of the community which tolerates them; they render existence in such a community less tolerable, than under the most crushing despotism; but in time to come, to which no man, who feels any concern for the name and honour of this country, can look forward without alarm or sorrow.”³⁸¹

Northern abolitionists and critics of the activities in Mississippi during the summer of 1835 described the men and women engaged in these abuses as violators of the American promise, rather than the “enterprising, intelligent, generous, magnanimous and chivalric”³⁸² people they professed themselves to be.

Other northern editorials presented similar critiques. These critics argued that the willingness to disregard the rules of law did not damage only those men beaten, exiled, or hanged during the summer’s frenzy, but threatened the very fabric of Mississippi’s and, more broadly, America’s society. Some argued that punishments meted out under the traditional system of law would have very likely produced similar sentences and penalties; but to disregard the judicial process threatened the viability of the entire community. As another critique from the Liberator argued, “there may be instances where the punishments thus inflicted, are of no greater severity, than would be ordained by laws for the same offense; but nothing

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² “Transactions in Mississippi,” Niles’ Register. October 17, 1835.

can be more pernicious than to entertain, on this account, any feeling, other than the deepest reprobation, for all such illegal outrages.”³⁸³

In yet another piece, the author argues against the concept of taking actions that extend beyond the law. “If the laws actually enforced prove insufficient,” the author contends, “let more rigorous ones be enacted.”³⁸⁴ To allow for individuals or groups to grant themselves powers that extended beyond the scope of the law placed the lives and property of everyone in the community at risk. The actions of Mississippi whites in response to the suspected plot demonstrated the consequences of such actions. As described in the editorial,

“It appears that not less than 30 men, black and white, have been hung during the great alarm at the South, without Judge or jury, but merely on suspicion, or on evidence exhorted from witnesses under torture. It is horrible to think of. And still more, not one of these men had actually committed any crime, but was only suspected that they intended to. If such lawless proceedings are tolerated by the government, life in that country must hereafter be held in a very uncertain tenure, - - the will of the mob without law or without cause may deprive a man of it at any moment.”³⁸⁵

Northern editorials did not limit their critiques of the expanding lawlessness in Mississippi to the suspected insurrectionary plot. Similar criticisms of the abuses can be seen in discussions of the response to the presence of gamblers in Vicksburg as well. In an article entitled “The

³⁸³ “Lynch’s Law.” *Liberator*. Boston: August 1, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 31; p. 123.

³⁸⁴ “The Late Outrage at Mississippi.” *Liberator*. Boston: August 22, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 34; p. 136.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Commotion in Mississippi” the author initially emphasizes his contempt for gamblers, stating “...for we hold all men who play at games of chance for money to be equally criminal thieves as housebreakers and pickpockets.”³⁸⁶ However, despite such sentiments, the writer expresses his disgust with the brutality with which the local citizenry dealt with these men who he claims were treated as though they, “so suddenly have become a nuisance with such magnitude, that nothing less than outrageous murders in their most atrocious sanguinary form could expiate it. We have utter repugnance to those people of respectability at Vicksburg.”³⁸⁷

This critique makes a number of significant arguments. First, as was the case regarding criticisms of the responses to the suspected insurrection, these actions demonstrated the ability of individuals or groups of people, without authority of the law, to determine to take the life or property of other citizens. An adequate system was already in place to deal with the criminal activities of these gamblers, and the author is shocked by the idea that some viewed murder, banishment, and the seizure of private property as a reasonable response to such a “nuisance.” Essentially, the will of the mob was permitted to supersede the Constitutional protections of the individual. Another editorial makes the Constitutional critique even more directly: “It is

³⁸⁶ “The Commotion in Mississippi.” *Liberator*. Boston: August 15, 1835. Vol. 5, Iss. 33; p. 132.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

the language of all our constitutions – it is one of the vaunted principles of free government – that a man’s person and property shall be sacred, except when the judgment of his peers, or the law of the land, shall subject him to penalties.”³⁸⁸

The editorial also makes a subtle critique of the “respectable people of Vicksburg.” As noted previously, the people of Vicksburg, as well as those in Hinds and Madison Counties, sought to use the stature of their selected representatives in order to add respectability to their actions. Conversely, the author makes the argument that the presence of gentlemen “of great worth” at the head of such activities presented the true “state of morals in Mississippi” for all to see.³⁸⁹ The actions of these respected leaders and of the broader community laid bare the false imagery of excessive violence being committed by the “middling sorts” while the elites remained somewhat aloof. In concluding the editorial, the author stresses that, “All that butchery, be it remembered, was done by ‘men of great worth and respectability.’”³⁹⁰ This “butchery” occurred not in spite of the wishes of community leaders, but rather as an expression of shared values and shared objectives held by these leaders and the broader community.

³⁸⁸ “Transactions in Mississippi,” *Niles’ Register*, October 17, 1835.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.* For discussions of the use of mob violence and the relationship between the actions of elite whites and the masses throughout American history see Christopher Waldrep, *Lynching in America: A History in Document* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

As the month wore on, some local critiques began to emerge as well. Some made arguments similar to those external critiques that suggested local actions had become excessive. These critiques generally supported a belief that local whites had the right to respond in defense of their families and communities in the face of an insurrectionary threat. However, for some, the actions had moved beyond such a point, entangling the lives of the guilty along with the innocent. Without the protections promised under the law, it became clear that mob rule was becoming a threat to individual rights and safety. William Thomson's July 12th letter expresses this sentiment. "How far this frenzy will drive the people it is impossible to say." He writes, "It has already been carried to an alarming length, involving the innocent with the guilty. It promises to become a greater evil than it was intended to correct. *The regulators need regulating* [italics mine]. It is supposed the Governor will have to call out the militia to restore order."³⁹¹

The sentiment that "the regulators need regulating" encapsulates the belief that the community's actions had moved beyond efforts of self-defense into a proactive attempt to tighten control over their enslaved people and to rid the community of any individuals not fully committed to the defense of slavery. In many ways, the anxieties related to this suspected

³⁹¹ MDAH "Letter from Dr. William H. Thomson to his wife," July 12, 1835 from Hinds County, Mississippi. John A. Murrell Clippings.

insurrection presented an “opportunity” for a strengthening of the institution of slavery in Mississippi, helping to lay the foundation for the closed society that came to be the hallmark of the state in the antebellum period and for the century that followed.³⁹² In writing retrospectively about the events of that July, future Governor S. S. Prentiss demonstrated such a view:

The excitement growing out of the insurrection of the slaves has subsided, and not the slightest danger is now anticipated. During the prevalence of the alarm, there were, throughout the state, six white men and about 15 negroes hanged. I think that the severe measures which were pursued, will prevent a recurrence of similar events – at least for a period of time. It ought certainly to serve as a warning to abolitionists not only of their own danger but of the great danger they are doing the slaves themselves by meddling with them.³⁹³

Ultimately, it did not become necessary for the governor to call out the militia to restore order. Approximately three weeks after the formation of the committee in Livingston, its members, believing that they had successfully responded to the perceived threat, voted to disband.³⁹⁴ In its final public proclamation, the committee reaffirmed its belief in the severity of the threat and the necessity of their actions, emphasizing a belief that an

³⁹² There are similarities between what occurs in Mississippi following the threat of 1835 and in South Carolina during the 1740s following the Stono Rebellion. For discussion of white responses to the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974), pp. 308-330.

³⁹³ George Lewis Prentiss, *A Memoir of S. S. Prentiss* (New York: C. Scribner, 1855), p. 162. September 19, 1835 letter from S.S. Prentiss to his mother and sisters, Vicksburg, Mississippi.

³⁹⁴ MDAH Madison County 1835 Uprising, subject file, *Before the War in Madison County*, Charles Elon Bowering, Sr., p. 9.

“imperious necessity...compelled them to act, and cause the lives of a number of their fellow-beings to be taken.”³⁹⁵ Charles Bowering describes the “success” of the committee’s actions thusly: “Any attempt to carry out an organized insurrection of the slaves was now quelled. The safety of the communities was restored. The white women were again free to go outside the house, and the men free to go to work without fear of massacre.”³⁹⁶

Violence did not immediately end with the cessation of the committee; neither did white fears and anxieties. White Mississippians maintained a belief that the possibilities for slave unrest remained present despite their actions. Stephen Duncan’s writings demonstrate how white Mississippians, following periods of suspected slave unrest, sought increased vigilance and remained fearful of future unrest.³⁹⁷ Living in Mississippi in 1831 following Nat Turner’s attempted insurrection, Duncan describes his fears in a letter to Thomas Butler. After first stating that he does not “credit the story of the extension of the Virginia insurrection,” Duncan immediately moves on to express how he has “apprehension that we will one day have our throats cut in this country. We now have 5 blacks to

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Stephen Duncan was a co-founder of the Mississippi Colonization Society and among the largest slaveholders in Mississippi, owning over 1000 slaves on numerous cotton and sugar plantations by the 1850s. See Martha Jane Brazy, *An American Planter: Stephen Duncan of Antebellum Natchez and New York* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

one white; and within 4 hours march of Natchez there are 2200 able bodied male slaves...it behooves us to be vigilant – but silent.”³⁹⁸ Mississippians shared similar sentiments following the unrest of 1835, and these fears shaped their subsequent actions.

³⁹⁸ Martha Brazy, *An American Planter: Stephen Duncan of Antebellum Natchez and New York* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p. 53.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: FOUNDATIONS OF MISSISSIPPI'S CLOSED-SOCIETY

As might be expected, in the years and decades following the unrest of 1835 in Mississippi, local whites made conscious efforts to tighten their control over their enslaved population and to limit the potential for future unrest that they believed might emerge through slaves' interactions with 'unsavory' whites and free blacks. Mississippi slaveholders and white non-slaveholding supporters of the institution built upon many of the modes of control previously at their disposal. In many senses, the structure of Mississippi's "closed society" became increasingly recognizable during the period following this unrest. Nonetheless, it should not be assumed that the unrest of the summer of 1835 created the culture of violence that came to represent Mississippi's closed society. Instead, the summer of 1835 represented a flashpoint; a point in time where tensions and pressures at the core of Mississippi's identity came more clearly into view.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁹ In many ways, the experiences seen here correlate to patterns of "race riots" through the mid-twentieth century where racial tensions in various communities reached a tipping point with white mobs attacking black communities in places such as Wilmington, North Carolina, Atlanta, Chicago, and Detroit. During much of the second half of the twentieth century, many of these urban uprisings took the form of conflicts between black communities and white institutions and police. The main factor connecting these differing trends is the fact that the foundations for the unrest were laid long before the physical expressions reached the surface. See Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in*

Mississippi whites' desires to maintain control and "order" served as the guiding light for their actions. The rapid rate of growth and expansion of the enslaved population in Mississippi during the 1830s only served to increase concerns with the loss of control and likewise witnessed increased efforts to assert (or reinforce) authority. The demographic shifts in the areas at the heart of this project help to explain the relationship between perceptions of a growing threat and increasing levels of violence. Between the years of 1830 and 1840, no counties in Mississippi saw higher rates of increase in their enslaved populations than Hinds and Madison Counties, the central areas of the suspected uprising. In 1830, slaves made up 39.4 percent of the population. By 1840, that number had risen to 68.8 percent.⁴⁰⁰ This rise in the percentage of the population comprising of enslaved men and women was accompanied with an increased need for control. As Herbert Aptheker points out, two schools of thought existed during the

North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); David Fort Godshalk, Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Gregory Mixon, The Atlanta Race Riot: Race, Class and Violence in a New South City (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2005); William M. Tuttle, "Contested Neighborhoods and Racial Violence: Prelude to the Chicago Riot of 1919" Journal of Negro History, Vol. 55, No. 4 (October 1970), pp. 266-288; William M. Tuttle, Race Riot: Chicago in the Summer of 1919 (New York: Antheneum, 1970); Robert Shogan and Tom Craig, The Detroit Race Riot: A Study in Violence (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton Books, 1964); Dominic J. Capeci and Martha Wilkerson, Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943 (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1991); Sidney Fine, Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); and Susan Olzak, Susanne Shanahan, and Elizabeth H. McEneaney, "Poverty, Segregation and Race Riots: 1960 to 1993" American Sociological Review, Vol. 61, No. 4 (August 1996), pp. 590-613.

⁴⁰⁰ L. C. Gray and Esther Katherine Thompson, History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860, Vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1958).

antebellum period regarding the best methods of control. “One group, definitely the minority, which in line with modern usage, may be designated as the liberal school, favored reforms and greater elasticity in the slave system; the other group, of conservative or reactionary opinion, would tolerate no coddling, but urged an out and out policy of blood and iron.”⁴⁰¹ As witnessed through the experiences of Hinds and Madison Counties, the “policy of blood and iron” came to dominate efforts for control in antebellum Mississippi and beyond.

These demographic shifts were accompanied by economic shifts in the cotton South as well. As Gavin Wright describes in The Political Economy of the Cotton South, “The average slaveowner was more than five times as wealthy as the average Northerner, more than ten times as wealthy as the average nonslaveholding Southern farmer. A man who owned two slaves and nothing else was as rich as the average man in the North.”⁴⁰² Such economic realities help to explain the ever-increasing desire to acquire slaves and the defense of the institution by southern slaveholders as well as non-slaveholding whites who themselves aspired to join the slaveholding class.

⁴⁰¹ Herbert Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 59.

⁴⁰² Gavin Wright, The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), p. 35.

It is important to recognize that the rising wealth associated with slavery was not limited solely to the product (cotton) being produced by enslaved men and women, but also connected to the rising value of the slaves themselves. As Wright suggests, the increasing cost and value of slaves during the 1840s and 1850s impacted the broader southern society.⁴⁰³ As witnessed by the reactions of whites to the suspected uprising in 1835, smaller landholders and slave owners did not simply follow the will of larger planters. As slave values increased, the interest in protecting and controlling the enslaved property drew increased importance throughout the broader community. The greatest threat to wealth and prosperity in the South became the threat to the slave property as commodity, not the slave as laborer.⁴⁰⁴

Importantly, this threat was not felt solely by elite slaveholders, nor were they able to dominate the responses to perceived threats. A shared interest in the value of slavery helped to create shared responses to perceived threats. It becomes clear that “the nature of American slave prices had pervasive effects on political life as well, creating an economic stake in slaves as valuable property as opposed to the more general stake in cotton

⁴⁰³ Ibid

⁴⁰⁴ For discussions of slaveholders’ views of slaves as commodities rather than laborers see, Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 19-44.

agriculture under slavery, and converting every minor threat to the institution into a direct threat to slaveholders everywhere in the United States.”⁴⁰⁵ Shared views of enslaved men and women as profitable commodities coalesced differing segments of Mississippi’s white community behind shared, collective actions.

Well before the unrest of the summer of 1835 controlling the enslaved population held primacy in white Mississippi’s collective thought. Whites in Mississippi viewed any slave outside the direct supervision or control of his slaveholder or his representatives as a potential threat. As such, Mississippi laws made efforts to control the movement of enslaved people with potential consequences for both slaveholders and their slaves should they not be properly regulated. According to the laws of Mississippi, “a slave could not leave the domain of his master without a written pass. Neither could a master allow his slave to go at large and live as a free man, which would amount to a perpetual pass. To be more exact, an owner could not permit his own slaves to be absent over four hours without a pass, nor permit strange slaves to remain on his premises.”⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁵ Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), p. 154.

⁴⁰⁶ Charles Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1933), p. 76.

As early as 1822, Mississippi law established the prescribed punishment for slaves found away from their homes without written permission from their masters. This law declared that it shall be “lawful for any person to apprehend and carry him before a justice of the peace, to be by his order punished with stripes, or not, at his discretion, not exceeding twenty stripes.” As the statute continued, it granted the power of punishment to individual slaveholders and their overseers as well. According to the statute, “any slave found on another plantation other than his own, without permission from his master or overseer, may be given ten lashes on his or her bare back, for every such offence.”⁴⁰⁷ In 1857 the legislature revised the law, increasing the number of lashes to be applied from ten to twenty.⁴⁰⁸ Mississippi whites understood that it was essential that enslaved people remain under the watchful eye of their masters. An unknown slave, or a slave seen out of his proper “place” represented a direct threat to the community.

Slaveholders were held responsible for the actions of their slaves and Mississippi law dictated that they be held accountable for the misdeeds of their enslaved people. Mississippi law required slaveholders who

⁴⁰⁷ The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi in Which are Comprised All Such Acts of the General Assembly of a Public Nature, as Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823 (Natchez, Mississippi: Francis Baker), Chapter 73, Article 8, p. 371.

⁴⁰⁸ The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi: Published by Authority of the Legislature (Jackson, Mississippi, E. Barksdale, State Printer, 1857), Chapter 73, Article 4, p. 244.

discovered slaves away from their property without a proper pass to bring the slave before a justice of the peace. Under such a system, a slave's failure to produce a proper pass could result in both the whipping of the slave and the fining of the owner.⁴⁰⁹ The Mississippi state legislature established that,

“if any master, overseer, or employer, shall knowingly permit or suffer any slave or slaves, not belonging to him or her, to be and remain in or about his or her, house or kitchen, or upon his or her plantation, above four hours at any time, without leave of the owner, overseer or employer of such slave or slaves, he or she, so permitting, shall forfeit and pay ten dollars for every such offense.”⁴¹⁰

Such legislation permitted the broader community to compel individual slaveholders and overseers to monitor the movements and activities of slaves belonging to others in the neighborhood.

Over time, Mississippians came to believe that they needed to take a more systematic approach to monitoring their enslaved population. As such, the state created a more efficient system of slave patrols to enforce limitations on the movements and interactions of enslaved people. White Mississippians viewed enslaved men and women as a threat common to all free citizens of the state, and as such, the state structured a system through which all able bodied white men could take part in the regulation of enslaved

⁴⁰⁹ Charles Sydnor, Slavery in Mississippi (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1933), p. 77.

⁴¹⁰ The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi in Which are Comprised All Such Acts of the General Assembly of a Public Nature, as Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823 (Natchez, Mississippi: Francis Baker), Chapter 74, Article 1, p. 389.

people. Initially the system of slave patrols emerged as an adaptation of the militia whereby individuals could be called to serve when dangers arose. All slaveholders and all men subject to service in the militia were made available for the slave patrols. It was the responsibility of the militia captains to manage the slave patrol in assigned districts and to make detachment rosters consisting of a leader and three patrol members. Each detachment was expected to patrol their district once every two weeks, and more regularly in times of unrest.⁴¹¹ The system evolved in 1831 as incorporated towns,

“were authorized to control the patrol system within their own boundaries, thus limiting the authority of militia captains...Two years later the remaining power of militia captains was transferred to the boards of county police, each member of which was authorized to appoint patrol leaders, who then summoned patrol detachments of five or more persons.”⁴¹²

These efforts to shift the control of slave patrols to local boards of police and rural authorities represented an understanding on the part of Mississippi’s citizens as to the realities of slavery and unrest: the immediacy of their potential threats (both in terms of time and space) dictated the necessity for local, community-regulated systems of control and defense. Such localized

⁴¹¹ Kevin Dougherty, *Weapons of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), p. 56.

⁴¹² *Ibid*, p. 78

control helps explain the ability to rapidly respond to threats such as those Mississippians believed to be engaging during the summer of 1835.

Debate exists as to the effectiveness of these slave patrols in Mississippi. William Scarborough argued that, “the county patrol was one of the most effective instruments in maintaining white control over the large population of the state.”⁴¹³ Charles Sydnor viewed its effectiveness differently, arguing that, “the patrol seems to have been no more efficient than the medieval town watch.”⁴¹⁴ Regardless of effectiveness, the development of the patrol system demonstrates a shared understanding among white Mississippians as to the need for communal efforts to control the enslaved population. As this project demonstrates, when the perceived threat exceeded the abilities of established laws, the systems of enforcement in these Mississippi communities maintained the flexibility to adjust where necessary.

Efforts to control slaves were not limited to the creation of the slave patrols. According to the Woodville (Miss.) Republican, in 1836 town residents enacted a law limiting access to the town by slaves. The law prohibited slaves from entering the town on Sundays unless in the company of a white person, and they were prohibited from attending church without

⁴¹³ William Kaufman Scarborough, The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1966).

⁴¹⁴ Charles Sydnor, Slavery in Mississippi (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1933), p. 79.

written permission. Additionally, slaves found to be loitering within the town “should be seized by the patrol or town constable and punished by lashes not exceeding twenty.”⁴¹⁵ Three years later, the town enacted a similar law, adding a fine for slave owners should their slaves be caught within the city without proper documentation.⁴¹⁶

Such efforts were not limited to Woodville. The city of Natchez similarly sought to control its enslaved population and limit their ability to gather at the infamous “Natchez Under the Hill.” According to one account, the town’s courthouse bells would ring at four o’clock each Sunday afternoon. “Then commences a ludicrous scene of hurrying and scampering, from the four corners of the town; *for woe be the unlucky straggler, who is found after the limited period within the forbidden bounds!* The penalty of forty lashes, save one, is speedily inflicted, by way of a lesson in the science of discretion.”⁴¹⁷ Similarly, in Grenada, “the constable was imposed the task of ringing a bell at nine in the evening, as a signal for all slaves to be in their proper places. It was the duty of the patrol of Grenada to whip every slave found away from the home, unless on the business of his master, and this

⁴¹⁵ Woodville Republican, April 23, 1836.

⁴¹⁶ Woodville Republican, October 12 - December 9, 1839.

⁴¹⁷ Sydnor, Slavery in Mississippi, p. 80.

had to be evidenced by a written pass.”⁴¹⁸ Whites throughout Mississippi sought to control the enslaved population by limiting their freedom of movement and their ability to congregate.

Knowledge of enslaved people’s desire to press back against the constraints of slavery remained in the forefront of the minds of Mississippi whites. Enslaved men and women received the harshest punishments for acts of aggression towards whites. The legislature declared that the punishment for the act of assault and battery on a white person should result in no more than one hundred lashes per day for three consecutive days.⁴¹⁹ In the even more extreme action of committing murder or insurrection, the state declared,

“If any negro or other slave shall, at any time, consult, advise or conspire to rebel, or make insurrection, or shall plot or conspire the murder of any free white person or persons whatsoever, every such consulting, plotting or conspiring, shall be adjudged and deemed felony, and the slave or slaves, convicted thereof, in manner herein after directed, shall suffer death.”⁴²⁰

Such legislation adds credence to the arguments made by several whites during the panic of the summer of 1835 that the violence committed against

⁴¹⁸ MS Record of meeting of Grenada Selectmen, covering the period August 9, 1836 to May 2, 1856 as reprinted in Syndor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, p. 82.

⁴¹⁹ *The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi: Published by Authority of the Legislature* (Jackson, Mississippi, E. Barksdale, State Printer, 1857), Article 55, p. 248.

⁴²⁰ *The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi in Which are Comprised All Such Acts of the General Assembly of a Public Nature, as Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823* (Natchez, Mississippi: Francis Baker), Chapter 73, Article 50, p. 380. The Revised Code of 1857 maintained the same punishment for such crimes. *The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi: Published by Authority of the Legislature* (Jackson, Mississippi, E. Barksdale, State Printer, 1857), Article 57, p. 248.

slaves suspected of involvement in a planned insurrection ultimately did not exceed the punishments likely to have been doled out by the justice system had these men been afforded the benefit of trial. In many senses, Mississippi “justice” differed little from the implementation of extralegal mob rule.

The attempt to maintain order and control in antebellum Mississippi required more than simply monitoring and regulating the movements and actions of the enslaved population. Mississippi whites interested in controlling the enslaved population understood that they would also have to construct a means of limiting their interactions with free blacks and other whites within the community as well. Consequently, Mississippi’s legislators constructed clear boundaries between these groups of people and implemented a series of punishments to limit such interactions. In 1823 state legislators established a fine of twenty dollars for each offense, “If any white person shall at any time be found in company with slaves, free negroes or mulattoes, at any unlawful meeting or assembly, and oath thereof being made before a justice of the peace.”⁴²¹ By 1857, lawmakers made such

⁴²¹ The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi in Which are Comprised All Such Acts of the General Assembly of a Public Nature, as Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823 (Natchez, Mississippi: Francis Baker), Chapter 73, Article 19, p. 373.

interactions far more punitive, assessing a fee up to five hundred dollars for any such interactions.⁴²²

Lawmakers applied similar restrictions on the interactions between enslaved people and free blacks. Believing that free blacks held the potential for spawning unrest among their enslaved population, Mississippi lawmakers asserted that “All meetings or assemblies of slaves, or free negroes or mulattoes, mixing and associating with such slaves, above the number of five, at any place or public resort, or at any meeting-house or houses, in the night, or any school or schools, for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered an unlawful assembly.” The discovery of such an “unlawful assembly” would result in the issuance of a warrant authorizing entrance into the home, “for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such slaves, free negroes, or mulattoes, and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders at the discretion of any such justice of the peace, not exceeding thirty-nine lashes, in the manner hereinafter directed.”⁴²³

Without question, Mississippi whites viewed the very presence of free blacks in their communities with suspicion. As such, whites made efforts to

⁴²² The Revised Code of the Statute Laws of the State of Mississippi: Published by Authority of the Legislature (Jackson, Mississippi, E. Barksdale, State Printer, 1857), Article 93, p. 255.

⁴²³ The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi in Which are Comprised All Such Acts of the General Assembly of a Public Nature, as Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823 (Natchez, Mississippi: Francis Baker), Chapter 74, Article 2, p. 389.

limit the ability of slaveholders to emancipate their slaves, to restrict the ability for such emancipated slaves to remain in the state, to regulate the numbers of free blacks moving to Mississippi, and ultimately constricting the actions of those few who remained. In one of the few areas where the state limited the power of slaveholders over their enslaved property, Mississippi's lawmakers established that, "It shall not be lawful for any person or persons, being the owner or owners of slaves, to emancipate them, or any of them, unless by his or her last will and testament, or by any other instrument in writing, under his, her, or their hand and seal attested and proved, in the manner required by law, by two credible witnesses." Under this law the circumstances under which a slaveholder could choose to emancipate his slaves were limited. In addition to the above requirements, however, the law mandated that slaveholders must also demonstrate that emancipated slaves "have done or performed some meritorious act for the benefit of such owner or owners, or some distinguished service for the benefit of this state."⁴²⁴ In the eyes of the state, only the most deserving of slaves could be emancipated in Mississippi.

⁴²⁴ The Revised Code of the Laws of Mississippi in Which are Comprised All Such Acts of the General Assembly of a Public Nature, as Were in Force at the End of the Year 1823 (Natchez, Mississippi: Francis Baker), Chapter 73, Article 75, p. 385. Further restrictions were applied in cases where the slaveholder's wife survived his death. The law allowed for payment of debt, or portions of debts, to come through the sale of enslaved men and women otherwise freed through the terms of their master's will.

The state of Mississippi declared it illegal for free blacks to immigrate to the state as early as 1823. In a stunningly clear statement of policy, the state legislature asserted that free blacks entering the state, if discovered, ultimately risked being taken up, jailed, and “sold to the highest bidder.”

The law declared that,

“...it shall not be lawful for any free negro or mulatto, to emigrate to, and become a resident of this state. And if any free negro or mulatto shall come into this state to reside, contrary to the provisions of this act, and remain therein thirty days after notice given to such free negro or mulatto, to depart out of the state, it shall be lawful, and is hereby made the duty of any justice of the peace, to require any such free negro or mulatto, to find good and sufficient security, in the sum of five hundred dollars, conditioned that he, she, or they, will leave this state, within thirty days thereafter, and will not return within the limits thereof. And if any such free negro or mulatto shall remain in default, in finding such security, for the space of twenty days after such requisition, it is hereby made the duty of such justices of the peace, or any other justice of the peace, to cause such free negro or mulatto to be apprehended and committed to jail; and after twenty days notice thereof, to sell such negro or mulatto, to the highest bidder, for the term or twelve months, and the proceeds of the sale, after deducting the fees for such commitment and detention in jail, shall be paid into the county treasury of the county, where such free negro or mulatto may be apprehended and sold.”⁴²⁵

To be a free black and an outsider, thus unknown by the established members of the community, made these men and women unacceptable for residency in the state. Their mere presence would not be tolerated.

⁴²⁵ Ibid, Chapter 73, Article 80, p. 387.

Free blacks residing in the state at the time of the passage of these laws did not share the same risks of enslavement, but they were certainly not without restrictions and additional burdens.⁴²⁶ Mississippi law required free blacks in the state to have a certificate declaring their status to be registered with the Office of Orphans' court in the county where he or she worked.⁴²⁷ Likewise, the law required free blacks to renew their certificates every three years.⁴²⁸

Though Mississippi law clearly restricted the activities of Mississippi's free black and enslaved communities, this should not leave the impression that members of both classes did not continue to attempt to carve out their own space within the system throughout the antebellum period. William Johnson, a free black man often referred to as "the barber of Natchez," represents such efforts.⁴²⁹ Johnson's successes and acquisitions demonstrate that he was in many ways exceptional as a black man in antebellum Mississippi. Ultimately, however, his presence and experiences

⁴²⁶ It should be noted that free blacks in Mississippi did hold certain risks of enslavement if they were to move to a different county and not provide the county where they lived or worked with proper documentation as acquired from the state. State law dictated that "...Every free negro or mulatto who now resides, or may hereafter lawfully reside in this state, shall be registered and numbered in a book to be kept for that purpose, by the register of the orphans of the court." This document will list "the age, name, sex, color and stature of such free negro and mulatto, together with any visible mark or scar on his or her face, head or hands..." Ibid, Chapter 73, Article 81, p. 388.

⁴²⁷ Ibid, Chapter 73, Article 83, p. 388.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, Chapter 73, Article 84, p. 388.

⁴²⁹ Edwin Adams and William Ransom Hogan, The Barber of Natchez (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954).

in Mississippi are instructive of the continued efforts of free blacks to live and prosper within Mississippi's closed society.

William Johnson was born a slave in Mississippi in 1809 before being freed by his owner in 1820. It is believed that his owner, who had previously freed his mother and sister, was also his father.⁴³⁰ Johnson became an apprentice barber in Natchez before opening his own shop in 1830. Ultimately, Johnson came to own numerous barbershops and a bathhouse. In addition, he owned land, a number of buildings that he routinely rented out, and numerous slaves. Though a free black man in an era where men of his status tended to be treated with distrust and disdain, Johnson came to be viewed by local whites as a respected member of the community of Natchez, as exemplified by the newspaper editorial following his death.⁴³¹ The article, found in the Natchez Courier two days after his murder on June 14, 1851 reads as follows:

SHOCKING MURDER

Our city was very much excited on Tuesday morning, hearing that what could only be deemed a horrible and deliberate murder had been committed upon an excellent and

⁴³⁰ William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis, eds., William Johnson's Natchez: The Antebellum Diary of a Free Negro (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951)

⁴³¹ Baylor Winn, also a free-black landholder, killed Johnson on June 12, 1851 in a long running dispute over land. Johnson's son, a free black apprentice, and a slave witnessed the murder. Winn was imprisoned and twice brought to trial. However, Winn's lawyers claimed that he was a white man (of mixed white and Native American ancestry), rather than a free black and that none of the witnesses could testify against him in court. Ultimately, after being unable to prove his status as a black man, charges were dropped and Winn was released from jail. Ibid.

most inoffensive man. It was ascertained that William Johnson, a free man of color, born and raised in Natchez, and holding a respected position on account of his character, intelligence and deportment, had been shot.⁴³²

The article concludes by observing that the Reverend Mr. Watkins held Johnson up as an example “well worthy of imitation by all of his class. We observed very many of our most respected citizens at his funeral.”⁴³³ Through his deeds and accomplishments, Johnson gained a level of acceptance and security within the community.

Much like Mississippi slaveholder Everard Green Baker, discussed briefly in the introduction of this project, William Johnson viewed himself as a pious and moral slaveholder, and he saw his enslaved property as victims of their own weaknesses as opposed to men and women struggling within an oppressive system.⁴³⁴ He expresses this moral view of himself in his description of the sale of Steven, an enslaved man who Johnson viewed as a victim of the evils of alcohol. On December 30, 1843 Johnson describes his feelings on the impending sale, writing, “And what is the Cause of my parting with him, why it is nothing but Liquor, Liquor, His fondness for it. Nothing more, poor Fellow. There are many worse fellows

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid. It should be noted that at the time of his death, Johnson was believed to have property worth in excess of twenty to thirty thousand dollars.

⁴³⁴ Baker is discussed on pages 2 and 3 of the introduction. See also Everard Green Baker Diaries, February 8, 1847. Southern Historical Collection #41, Volumes 2-4 (Typescripts) Box 1. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

than poor Steven is, God Bless Him.”⁴³⁵ The following day, Johnson expresses the pains he feels in selling Steven (while neglecting to consider the emotions of his slave). “To day has been to me a very Sad Day; many tears was in my Eyes to day On acct. of my Selling poor Steven.”⁴³⁶ And finally, on the day of the sale Johnson expressed his full sentiments regarding the sale of his longtime slave:

“I rested bad Last night. I had much Care On my mind, the night appeared very Long -- I got up this morning Early and took Steven with me down to the Ferry Boat and gave him up to the Overseer of Young & Cannon. Crawford was his name I gave Steven a pair [of] Suspenders and a pr of Socks and 2 Cigars, Shook hands with him and see [him] go On Board for the Last time I felt hurt but Liquor is the Cause of his troubles; I would not have parted with Him if he had Only have Let Liquor alone but he Cannot do it I believe, I received a check from Mr Cannon to day On Mr Britton & Co for four Hundred dollars and a demand note or due bill for two Hundred more.”⁴³⁷

Johnson portrays a sense of sentimentality in regards to the sale of his slave. However, the diary, read more fully, expresses a very different view of William Johnson as a slaveholder and of Steven as his enslaved property.

The interactions between William Johnson and Steven, as well as those involving other enslaved men and women discussed throughout the diary demonstrate the continuing tensions within the system of slavery and

⁴³⁵ William Johnson, *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-bellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968), Diary entry, December 30, 1843.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, William Johnson's Diary, December 31, 1843.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, William Johnson's Diary, January 1, 1844.

the role of violence in addressing these tensions. The laws passed by Mississippi legislators demonstrate the efforts taken to maintain order and to assert the authority of Mississippi slaveholders over their slaves. Johnson's words and interactions with his enslaved population, on the other hand, demonstrate *why* such efforts were needed.

It is true that Johnson makes references throughout the diary regarding Steven's fondness for alcohol, and that he believes this to be a source of diminishing Steven's quality as a slave. He writes, for instance about Steven's propensity for getting drunk and staying out all night and returning late for the next morning's work on one occasion.⁴³⁸ Similarly he describes having to bring Steven home from drinking the night prior to his eventual sale.⁴³⁹ Similar references can be seen throughout Steven's time as Johnson's property.

While the presence of alcohol flows throughout Johnson's narrative of his interactions with Steven, the central tension of their "relationship" centers on Steven's willingness to constantly abscond and Johnson's efforts, usually through force and violence (and ultimately through his sale) to control his slaves. Steven saw his ability to run from the plantation as a means of mitigating his conditions in much the same manner as Israel

⁴³⁸ Ibid, March 19, 1838.

⁴³⁹ Ibid, December 31, 1843.

Campbell.⁴⁴⁰ On March 31, 1838, Johnson describes one of his efforts to find Steven after yet another run. After failing to find Steven over the course of the day, his escaped slave “sent me word that if I would only let him off without whipping him that he would never run away again during his life.”⁴⁴¹ Steven continued to run over the next 6 years, but his actions demonstrate his understanding that he possessed the ability to control certain aspects of his condition as a slave, even if only in a limited manner. Steven was not alone in his willingness to run from Johnson. Numerous other slaves, as well as boys sent to serve as barber apprentices took the opportunity to flee at various points throughout the diary.

Johnson never addresses the reasons for the high number of slaves willing to run away from his property. He clearly believed that the fault rested on weaknesses among his enslaved men and women as opposed to being a consequence of his actions or their disaffection with their status as enslaved property. Johnson’s willingness to use violence to chastise his enslaved men and women, as well as the tone in which he describes such acts of violence proves instructive. In reading Johnson’s diary, it becomes clear that he finds nothing exceptional in his the use of the whip or cowhide

⁴⁴⁰ For example of Israel Campbell’s willingness to run and his efforts use running as a tool to limit the abuses of his slave master see Israel Campbell, *An Autobiography: Bond and Free: or Yearnings for Freedom, from my Greenbrier House. Being the Story of My Life in Bondage, and My life in Freedom* (Philadelphia, C.E.P. Brinckloe & Co., 1861). Electronic Edition. Property of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, p. 42.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, March 31, 1838.

in his daily actions. Such incidents are simply a part of the course of business from Johnson's perspective. Johnson speaks freely of his willingness to having "Boxed Bills Jaws and Kicked his Back Side" for smoking some of his cigars, for example.⁴⁴² Similarly, Johnson shows little excitement in his description of having Steven handcuffed and flogged.⁴⁴³

It is important to realize that Johnson viewed his use of violence as an effective tool in controlling his slaves. When, having recaptured Steven away from the plantation, Johnson immediately turned to his preferred method of chastisement. Johnson "brought him home after a while and I went to the stable and gave him a severe thrashing with the cow hide – Then he was perfectly calm and quiet and could do his work."⁴⁴⁴ Johnson believed that his actions had quelled Steven's spirit, finishing his entry by proclaiming that, "Tis singular how much good it does some people to get whipped."⁴⁴⁵ Believing he had, through violence, brought order to a disorderly slave, Johnson's misreading of the events quickly came to light as his journal entry approximately a week later noted his frustration in learning that Steven had once again run away.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴² Ibid, November 16, 1838.

⁴⁴³ Ibid, August 10, 1840.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, March 19, 1838.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid, March 27, 1838.

This undercurrent of violence and unrest is not only seen through individual slaves running away from William Johnson in his diary. Johnson also describes suspicious fires being set on consecutive nights in August of 1839 through which he suffered the loss of a barn and some cotton. Slaveholders viewed fires with extreme suspicion as the setting of fires had marked previous incidents of slave unrest, not only in Mississippi, but throughout America's slave experience.⁴⁴⁷ Additionally, Johnson demonstrates the community's collective response to certain threats as well. In July 1841, for instance, local citizens suspected the presence of a number of runaway slaves in the area.

“Large Camp of Our Citizens went out to day in the Bayous in search of Runaway Negroes. Capt. Ruffner & Mr McAlister, Mr Joseph Mesho and a number of Our Respectable Citizens was out Mr R finds a fire Burning in the woods Jo Mesho finds a Bucket of meat in a tree where the Runaways has been tho there was no Negroes Caught that has been Known.”⁴⁴⁸

This sort of collective effort to escape, along with the collective response of the townspeople of Natchez, demonstrates the underlying tensions continuously running throughout Mississippi's society.

⁴⁴⁷ Examples of slave uprisings associated with the setting of fires can be seen in New York in both 1712 and 1741. See Ira Berlin and Leslie Harris, *Slavery in New York* (New York: New Press, 2005); William Loren Katz, *Black Legacy: A History of New York's African Americans* (New York: Atheneum, 1997); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2005); Edwin Hoey, *Terror in New York: 1741* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, 1974), and Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Great Conspiracy of 1741: Slavery, Crime, and Colonial Law* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, July 24, 1841.

In an incident the following year, the local community came together to make a collective statement as to the consequences of acts of aggression towards whites. In Johnson's entry, he states,

“Nothing new that I Know of Except that some people on the other side of the River Caught One of those Runaway Slaves that helped Kill a man by the name Todd Living near Red River — _They Burned Him up soon after he was taken They Caught One moore of them and they Broght him to there Concordia Jail &c. They shot the other one but did [not] Kill Him.”⁴⁴⁹

Johnson's entry portrays these violent acts as unexceptional, yet necessary. Overall, however, Johnson's diary demonstrates that violence was not being used as a means of reestablishing order in the antebellum South, as the order often discussed failed to be the normal condition. Order, or the absence of unrest, was more an imagined desire than a tangible reality.

Though Johnson found himself in a position whereby members of the white community described him as an example for other free blacks in Mississippi, he remained part of group of people generally perceived as potential sources of unrest. In this sense, despite his status as a slaveholder, William Johnson maintained a shared space with his enslaved people. As he sought continuously to control his slaves and to create distance between his status and theirs, Mississippi's broader community continued to pursue similar methods of control over Johnson and his fellow free black

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid, June 6, 1842.

population.⁴⁵⁰ According to one account, the Mississippi Colonization Society oversaw the “collection of donations totally \$100,000 in the first three years. The society sent more than 570 former slaves to Liberia, but by 1837, as the South’s commitment to slavery hardened, the Mississippi colonization movement lost its popularity and effectiveness.”⁴⁵¹ White Mississippians’ suspicions of the free black population did not show similar signs of decline.

As seen above, it is clear that the summer of 1835 did not create the culture of violence that came to represent Mississippi’s society. Just as evidently, 1835 was not an ending point, as, despite the violence and brutality of the summer, continued acts of unrest can be seen in the years and decades that followed. The Niles’ National Register describes unrest similar to the actions that had occurred in 1835 in Hinds and Madison Counties also taking place in the state during July 1841. “The Tippecanoe Journal and Free Press, of Lafayette, Indiana, stated that evidence had been uncovered

⁴⁵⁰ These controls were not limited solely to the laws restricting the ability of free blacks to immigrate into the state. They also limited their ability to testify in court against white men and limited their freedom to interact or conduct trade with enslaved men and women. Also important was the creation of the Mississippi Colonization Society in 1821. This organization, much like the national American Colonization Society, sought to remove free blacks and send them to Liberia. The efforts of the Mississippi Colonization Society severely limited the number of free blacks residing in the state. Among the founders of the Mississippi Colonization Society were Joseph E. Davis, the brother of Jefferson Davis, future President of the Confederacy, and Stephen Duncan, who was among the South’s wealthiest men. For discussion of the Mississippi Colonization Society see Martha Jane Brazy, An American Planter: Stephen Duncan of Antebellum Natchez and New York (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Janet Sharp Hermann, Joseph E. Davis: Pioneer Patriarch (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990); and D. Clayton James, Antebellum Natchez (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968).

⁴⁵¹ D. Clayton James, Antebellum Natchez (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968, p. 175.

involving Negroes and whites in both Louisiana and Mississippi. The newspaper noted that one white man and a large number of negroes have been hanged.”⁴⁵² In recognition of the fact that many of those ultimately hanged may very well have been innocent of involvement, a subsequent article reported that the “contemplated insurrection...is likely to turn out to be a false alarm. Most of those that were arrested have been examined and acquitted.”⁴⁵³

Similarly, it was clear among many political and social leaders in Mississippi at the time of the unrest that no true insurrection plot existed. Just as clearly, however, the belief that such a threat existed, real or imagined, proved to have very real consequences. John A. Quitman, who served as governor of Mississippi from 1835 through 1836 and again from 1850 through 1851, viewed the events of 1835 as little more than a hoax. He believed that Stewart’s pamphlet describing his capture of John Murrell and the discovery of an immense plot was a plan devised by Stewart to “avenge and enrich himself. The whole ‘plot,’ and its tragic consequences, may now be regarded as one of the most extraordinary and lamentable hallucinations of our times.” Quitman concludes his observations of the conspiracy stating:

⁴⁵² Niles’ *National Register*, LX, August 7, 1841, p. 368. Reprinted in “Negro Slave Insurrections in Mississippi, 1800 – 1865,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jan., 1948), p. 79.

⁴⁵³ Niles’ *National Register*, LX, August 14, 1841, p. 384. Reprinted in “Negro Slave Insurrections in Mississippi, 1800 – 1865,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jan., 1948), p. 79.

“Much more in one humble opinion, has been said in the newspapers about a contemplated insurrection amongst the negroes in Mississippi, than was necessary. It has been represented as embracing a great extent of the country, and involving a great portion of our slave population. A stranger would suppose, from a perusal of the published accounts, that the whole white population of the State had barely escaped massacre and death, by the rising of savage and infuriating blacks. We live in an adjoining county (Hinds) to that where the plot was first discovered, and are convinced from all we can learn, that not one negro in every five hundred ever dreamed of, or was in the slightest way connected with it. It was confined principally to a single neighborhood, and set on foot by a few degraded and lawless white men. The negroes generally had nothing to do with it, and no testimony has been produced except in one or two neighborhoods, from which the inference can be drawn, that it was anything more than a neighborhood affair.”⁴⁵⁴

Though the summer of 1835 appears to be more a part of the continuum of antebellum Mississippi’s development rather than a starting point for the society that ultimately emerged, the actions of whites and blacks, and the ways in which they viewed and interacted with one another over the course of those days and weeks proves instructive. It should be clear that Mississippi’s natural state was one of unrest. What is seen throughout the antebellum period more broadly, and during the summer of 1835 in particular, are efforts to create calm or order rather than efforts to restore it. Enslaved men and women constantly sought ways to control and

⁴⁵⁴ J. F. H. Claiborne, Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860), p. 138.

alter their condition as slaves, including constant efforts to acquire freedom for themselves and their families. Simultaneously, slaveholders constantly sought to limit the unrest among their enslaved people, both for their physical safety and in order for their plantations to remain as productive and efficient as possible. These conflicting positions formed the foundation of the state's development.

This project also demonstrates the importance of identity and the creation of communities within the evolution of antebellum Mississippi. Views of self and the "other," within both the enslaved and free communities shaped the ways in which each group interacted internally and with each other. It is important to recognize that these constructed identities remained flexible and fluid. Individuals could be included or excluded from the group due to their actions or simply through the creation of myths and caricatures of one another. Significantly, these socially constructed identities shaped and justified the actions taken throughout the unrest of 1835 and beyond. Individuals written out of the community found themselves subject to unquestioned abuse.

What took place during the summer of 1835 can be described as nothing less than state sanctioned terrorism. These incidents demonstrate a blending of the power between the individual (and local communities) and

the broader structure of the state. The power of the state can be seen most directly through the passage of laws and the erection of a system designed to control the enslaved population. What is often less easily seen are the manners in which individuals and local communities are able to wield the power of the state. Local whites felt empowered to react without hesitation because they understood that their actions had the full backing of their community. The shared sense of identity within the community strengthens the desire and willingness of individuals to protect the community's interests. These men and women understood that their actions were indeed extralegal, often moving beyond the actions prescribed by the law. However, this is viewed as a positive action. White Mississippians believed that these actions were extralegal not because they are at odds with the state's system of justice, but rather because they go beyond the normal system's limits in order to achieve necessary, and thus justified, results.

Above all else, it should remain clear that Mississippi was a society built by, and sustained through, violence. In looking at antebellum Mississippi, it would be inaccurate to describe violence as simply a byproduct of slavery. Likewise, slavery proved to be much more than a mere outgrowth of violence within the broader community. What is clear from the documents provided by both former slaveholders and former slaves

is that the two entities, violence and slavery, ultimately became inseparable parts of the emerging culture in antebellum Mississippi. This project is not an attempt to make villains out of the men and women who either owned slaves or were complicit in the maintenance of the system, although I would argue that such conclusions could well be justified. Nor is this an attempt to make heroes out of the men and women able to survive this system; though the survival of one's mind, body, and soul under conditions often designed to destroy them might easily be viewed as such. This project goes to a larger observation, beyond the character of the men and women on both sides of the struggles of slavery, to an understanding of the development of antebellum Mississippi more broadly. It is undeniable that violence and the threat of violence on the part of slaveholders and their subordinates played an essential role in the maintenance and control of the institution. Simultaneously, it appears that the presence of violence, along with the fear of future violence, at the hands of enslaved men and women played a crucial role in how white Mississippians chose to construct their communities. In areas ranging as widely as those of labor (what labor would be performed and by whom) to the makeup, and possible destruction, of the slave community and individuals often revolved around acts of open or suggested violence. In order to understand the evolution of Mississippi, the system of

slavery, and the lives of the men and women involved therein (both slave and free) one must understand and acknowledge the centrality of violence and fear in constructing all aspects of this society.

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